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Communist Party Journal “Rudé právo” remembers the Prague Spring

Come citare questo articolo:
Virginia Conti, *Communist Party Journal “Rudé právo” remembers the Prague Spring*, «Bibliomanie. Letterature, storiografie, semiotiche», 51, no. 12, giugno 2021, doi:10.48276/issn.2280-8833.5964

1. The History of Czechoslovakia from the First Republic to the Modern Czech Republic

The First Republic of Czechoslovakia came into being at the end of the First World War in 1918. The National Revolutionary Assembly in Prague elected Tomáš Masaryk, one of the philosophers and politicians who championed Czechoslovakism, a political or cultural conception based on the concept of the existence of a Czechoslovak people and a Czechoslovak language, as President of the Republic. As has been noted by some scholars, the Czechoslovak provisional government had succeeded in a singular feat, namely gaining recognition by the international community in the absence of a real state.[1] The First Czechoslovak Republic existed until 1938 and consisted of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia. After 1933, Czechoslovakia remained the only functioning democracy in Eastern Europe, as the other eastern states had authoritarian or autocratic regimes. Until the German invasion and its dismemberment in 1939, Czechoslovakia remained the only country of liberal principles in Central and Eastern Europe.[2] In March 1938, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler’s next objective was the annexation of Czechoslovakia. The pretext was the hardships suffered by the German population living in the parts near the northern and western borders of Czechoslovakia, known collectively as Sudetenland. Their incorporation into Germany would have left the rest of Czechoslovakia without the strength to react to the subsequent occupation. During World War II, Czechoslovakia ceased to exist and was divided into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, belonging to the Third Reich, and the newly established Slovak Republic, while small parts went to Poland and Hungary. The Munich Conference on 30th September 1938 favoured the revision of Czechoslovakia’s borders also by Poland and Hungary, which took

advantage of Sudetenland crisis to participate in the division of Czechoslovakia.[3]
In the months following World War II a contrast of world power had developed in which the United States and the Soviet Union excelled. The United States government, together with most European countries, was convinced that a firm opposition to the Soviets was the most effective, and least dangerous, way to promote the ideals and identities of a Western coalition that began to define itself as a “free world”.[4] It was then that the Cold War took shape. Joseph Stalin intended to return to the imperial borders of Tsarist Russia lost in 1918, to gain control over the countries of Eastern Europe (in particular over Poland) and of course Germany, through agreements with the Allies on its future.[5] It was then agreed that Germany would be divided into Occupation Zones by the four Allied powers: the three western zones, occupied by the UK, the USA and France, were officially united in the Federal Republic of Germany, while in the Soviet Occupation Zone the German Democratic Republic was born. After the end of World War II, many Czechs welcomed the Russians as liberators. Prague was going to be friendly with Moscow for the same reason it had sought close links to Paris before 1938: because Czechoslovakia was a small, vulnerable country in central Europe and needed a protector.[6] It was not until 9th May 1945 that the Red Army units arrived in Prague and helped to clear the city of the remaining enemy forces and the new Czechoslovak government returned to Prague on 10th May: the key posts were occupied by the communists or their supporters.[7] The government brought with it a programme called Košice, named after the place where it was officially promulgated on 5th April. Its basis was the creation of the National Front, a union of the authorized political parties that had participated in the activities of the resistance abroad: the Communists, the Social Democrats, the National Socialists, the People’s Party; among the Slovak ones, the Slovak Democratic Party and the Slovak Communist Party. The National Front had a monopoly on the right to political decisions. At the end of 1945, two thirds of the industrial potential of the Czechoslovak Republic was owned by the state.[8] The Presidential Decree of 21st June 1945 prepared the agrarian reform, during which the Ministry of Agriculture divided up the lands of the expelled Germans, Hungarians and collaborators. The political atmosphere was also strongly influenced by the so-called unified organisations, the most important of which was the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement. These organisations were in fact in the service of the strongest party: the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Czechoslovakian politics was mostly limited by a respectful attitude towards the Soviet Union, whose influence on the whole world and especially on Central Europe had increased considerably. In the genuinely free, albeit psychologically fraught Czechoslovak elections of May 1946, the Communist Party won 40,2 percent of the vote in the Czech districts of Bohemia and Moravia, 31 percent in largely rural and Catholic Slovakia.[9] In June 1947 the negotiations for the Marshall Plan were implemented, in which the Soviet Union saw an attempt to limit its sphere of influence and, for this reason, was hostile towards the plan

itself. In the autumn of 1947 Stalin increased his pressure on the Czechoslovak communists to bring their struggle for the conquest of Czechoslovakia to a victorious conclusion. Under this pressure the non-communist parties, which had until then behaved too individualistically, formed an alliance. The struggle for power culminated in February 1948, the stimulus for the final confrontation was the transfer from Prague of the last six non-communist police commanders, for which 12 ministers from three parties resigned. Klement Gottwald took advantage of this and, with carefully executed pressure and a show of force, got the president to accept his resignation.[10] In March 1953 Stalin also died and a new phase of development began, in which Czechoslovakian leaders were suggested an internal policy that was more attentive to the needs of the population. In addition, Antonín Novotný was elected as party leader and remained in office until 1968. The sixties became the golden age of Czech culture, but throughout the Czechoslovak Republic, the way of life did not correspond to the image built up by propaganda. The standard of living of both components of the state had reached the same level at the price of a slowdown in the development of the Czech territory. The entire Slovak population began to support the reform attempts and began to criticise Novotný, who was replaced by Alexander Dubček in January 1968 as Prime Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

2. The Prague Spring

The year 1968 was one of the central years of the twentieth century in all over the world. The Prague Spring was a period of political liberalization which took place between January 5th 1968 and August 21st 1968. On October 31st 1967, a group of students from Prague’s Technical University organized a street demonstration in the Strahov District to protest electricity cuts at their dormitories.[11] The main banner that opened the march said *dej nám světlo* (give us light), an inscription that could also concern the absence of freedom.[12] The demonstrations of the students in Prague concluded with the intervention of the police and with several wounded citizens. The voices of the reformists, including the leader and future First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Alexander Dubček, did not promote the overthrow of the regime, but the project was to maintain greater political and press rights and more freedom of expression. The reforms, supported by the majority of the country, were seen by Moscow as a threat to the hegemony and security of the USSR over the countries of the Soviet Bloc, particularly because of the central position of Czechoslovakia within the Warsaw Pact Bloc. Initially, the leadership of the Soviet Union used diplomatic means to limit the reforms of the Czechoslovak government, after which it proceeded with military action. The Communist Central Committee met on January 3rd 1968 at the Prague Castle with the aim of reaching a compromise. First Secretary Novotný was supposed to leave his post as head of the Party and retain the presidency of the Republic.

Among the candidates there was Alexander Dubček, an upright, moderate communist, concerned about the support of the apparatus and public opinion.[13] He was convinced of the need to abandon the Soviet model and, for this reason, he brought together a group of politicians and intellectuals who were the main interpreters of an anti-authoritarian line defined as “Socialism with a human face”, which then opened the doors to the Prague Spring. He had the idea that there was a “third way”, a “democratic socialism” compatible with free institutions, respecting individual freedoms and collective goals.[14] On January 5th 1968 he was then elected Prime Secretary of the CCP and launched the so-called “New course”, a political strategy aimed at introducing elements of democracy in all sectors of society, without prejudice to the dominant role of the single party. In March, Novotný resigned as President of the Republic and General Ludvík Svoboda was elected under Dubček’s recommendation. Svoboda was an acceptable candidate for both Czechs and Slovaks and was a hero and a victim of the purges of the early 1950s, so he was highly respected by the population. The role of the National Front, the organization that gathered all and only the voices admitted to the political life of the country, had to be revitalized through various political parties, including the Communist Party.[15] The most important element of the Action Program, of the “Czechoslovak way to socialism”, was the renouncement of the Communist Party to the executive role and absolute power it had held since 1949.[16] After the Program, a Manifesto by intellectuals entitled Two Thousand Words also came to light in June 1968. The author of the document, the intellectual Ludvík Vaculík, did not realize that his document would have been read as an indictment against the Soviet regime, a demonstration that Dubček did not control the party, otherwise the text would not have appeared.[17] The document called for the re-establishment of political parties, the formation of citizens’ committees to defend and advance the cause of reform, and other proposals to take the initiative for further change out of the control of the Party. The Soviet leaders did not think that the document would have been taken seriously also by the workers and industries, besides reaching the squares. This anticipated the Brežnev doctrine, a line of Soviet foreign policy introduced by Leonid Brežnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union declared that any violation of the rules in countries belonging to the Soviet Bloc was an explicit threat to all countries and therefore required the intervention of the forces of the Soviet Union. The technical preparations for the invasion had been ready for months. The Brežnev doctrine had therefore been proclaimed to justify the Soviet occupation in Prague. With the publication of the document of intellectuals, the leaders of the countries of real socialism to which Dubček refused to go, met in Warsaw. On July 12th, from Warsaw came a letter to Dubček written at the end of the meeting: they accused the reactionary forces of having conquered mass media and started the communication campaign against the Soviet Union and the real communists.[18] The five top leaders of the communist countries stated that “it cannot be accepted that foreign

enemies lead Czechoslovakia out of socialism and Dubček is asked to put an end once and for all to the counter-revolutionary elements who took over press and radio”.[19] The Warsaw Pact leaders now felt it was essential to intervene to block the “counter-revolution”. Brežnev explained that the “plans” of the “international reactionary forces” on Prague constituted “a direct threat to the security of our countries”.[20] Dubček and the reformists wanted to hold out and achieve the goals set out in their Action Program, they did not want to return to the past conditions that the Party had condemned. On July 18th, the editorial staff of the “Rudé právo” decided to publish side by side the above-mentioned letter of invitation to Warsaw and the Czechoslovak reply.[21] On July 29th, negotiations were opened between the political offices of the two Communist parties, the Soviet and Czechoslovakian, almost fully present with the addition of the President Svoboda. Dubček would not have taken a step backwards with regard to his objectives. He would not have given in to demands for an end to the freedom of the press, therefore he called on the delegation in Prague to remain united. However, there was no record of the discussion between Brežnev and Dubček and the Warsaw Pact clauses explicitly excluded any intrusion into the internal affairs of an allied country; Soviet ultimatums were illegal and therefore should not be minuted.[22] The USSR asked Dubček the usual things: censorship, discipline and love for the USSR.[23] On 2nd August 1968 delegations from both sides were to meet in the Bratislava City Hall to sign the final document, which was difficult to interpret and after its signature and two hours of ceremony, there was the passage of the letter requesting Soviet help in Prague to repress the counter-revolution. The meeting in Bratislava ended with Brežnev raising Dubček and President Svoboda’s hands. The General Secretary of the PCUS believed that he had finally obtained Czechoslovak consent to the Soviet demands, while the Czechoslovak leadership was under the illusion that the Soviets would have never come to a military intervention. After Bratislava, the Soviets called Dubček every day to find out what progress had been made, but they did not intend to give any reasons about the legal deadline put forward by Dubček: some measures will be decided at the Central Committee at the end of August. Brežnev thus concluded that Dubček had done nothing and the Soviets, who had already started working on the organisation of the military option in May, decided to adopt the armed solution.[24] Thus, on August 21st 1968, 500,000 Warsaw Pact troops from Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, the DDR and the Soviet Union marched into Czechoslovakia. The invasion met some passive resistance and quite a lot of street protests, especially in Prague; but at the urgent behest of the Czech government it was otherwise unopposed.[25] They did not encounter armed, but the generalised opposition of almost the entire population and a large part of the Party.[26] Some newspapers, such as “Rudé právo” and “Práce”, appeared on 21st August in an extraordinary edition, quite different from the one planned, which reported the words of the chairman of the Central Committee of the CCP, according to which the occupation of the country had taken place without the President of the Republic

and the First Secretary having been informed.[27] The Soviets intended to establish a “revolutionary government of workers and peasants”, a new Czechoslovak leadership, convincingly socialist and pro-Soviet.[28] The strategy should have been a declaration of intent to defend socialism in Czechoslovakia and in this way the armed intervention would have been legitimised by the Czechoslovaks themselves. The project failed because the population rose up against the invaders. Tanks were set on fire, spontaneous strikes broke out, statements condemning the invasion were signed and distributed. During the invasion, the Soviets kidnapped and transferred six top Party leaders, including Dubček, to Soviet territory. After five o’clock in the morning Czechoslovakia was isolated and telephone communications with foreign countries were cut off. On their return to Prague, the Soviet leaders held hostage in Moscow encountered the difficulty of political compromise. The Soviets forced the Czechoslovaks to sign a treaty on the final stationing of a number of Soviet units without any expiry date. Then, on 16th October, in exchange for the withdrawal of most of the approximately five hundred and six hundred thousand occupying soldiers, the presence of the Soviet Union was institutionalised and the invasion of the country legalised after the fact.[29] The great crisis broke out in Prague on 22 th and 23th January 1969. A few days earlier, a young man reached the statue of St. Wenceslas, which dominates the square of the same name in the centre of Prague. The boy sprinkled himself with incendiary liquid and set himself on fire with a lighter, turning into a torch. He was Jan Palach, a student from Prague University, who wanted to show his dissent against the regime and the violence of the Soviets. In his coat pocket there was a letter announcing that a group of young people had decided to set themselves on fire to protest against the situation in the country, in particular to demand the abolition of censorship.[30] Dubček resigned, proposing Gustáv Husák as his successor, the one who would then start the so-called Normalization period. The Normalization continued until the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and mainly concerned the interruption of the democratization processes of the Prague Spring and also the return to a repressive communist regime and its long-term maintenance. In April 1969 Gustáv Husák was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. After gaining power in April 1969, Husák’s leadership began to implement the changes: real and alleged reformists were removed from leading positions in the media, the judiciary, cultural, social and political organisations. With Husák and the new leadership, the Normalisation process concerned the removal of reformist politicians who remained in charge, the amendment of reform laws and the strengthening of the alliance between Czechoslovakia and the other socialist countries. A complete return to before January 1968 was not possible, the new rulers of the Czechoslovak Republic in any case did everything possible in this direction.[31] From 1971 until the mid-1980s, the status quo was maintained in the party and society. Husák tried to follow closely the policy ordered by the Soviet Union to prevent a repetition of the events of 1968, using the least repressive methods possible. It is

necessary to arrive in the mid-Seventies for the various components of the Czechoslovak opposition, even those linked to the political experience of the Spring, to fully recognise the defeat and accept the idea of a long-term opposition.[32] On 1st January 1977, the Declaration of Charter 77 was published in Prague, a document which called for the Czechoslovak leadership not to violate human rights. This document started the slow, underground erosion of the already poor public legitimacy of regimes and their capacity for domination.[33] The group that signed Charter 77 was formed at the end of 1976 and among the signatories there were the playwright Václav Havel, writers Ludvík Vaculík and Pavel Kohout and former Spring politicians, most of them intellectuals and representatives of the unofficial Czechoslovakian culture.[34] Charter 77 brought together people of very different political orientations, united in defence of the respect for human rights, but only exerted great influence in the first half of the 1980s, when it was clear that socialism could not keep pace with the development of capitalist countries. An important external influence that affected the decline of Normalisation was the election of Michail Gorbačëv as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the PCUS in 1985. Gorbačëv began to implement reforms which were very similar to those of Dubček twenty years earlier: a policy of transparency (*glasnost*) and reconstruction (*perestrojka*) which ultimately accelerated the change, but which Czechoslovakian leaders nevertheless followed with distrust. Although the policy of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party had not officially changed, it was losing security due to the change in the Soviet Union, to which loyalty had been pledged for years. On the other hand, the critical spirit and audacity of the citizens grew, which materialised in the demonstrations of August 1988 (20th anniversary of the Soviet invasion) and the beginning of 1989 (20th anniversary of Jan Palach’s death).[35]

3. The Velvet Revolution

The year 1989 began with important overtones from previous years, such as the economic crisis in the Soviet Union. The growth of the product per capita had almost stopped. The spiral of indebtedness therefore continued to deepen (so much as to ventilate the increasingly feared risk of financial collapse).[36] There was also a great influence from the not inconsiderable flow of information from contacts through the Iron Curtain, travel and the penetration of TV and Western media. For this reason, the dissenting groups expressed their demands for liberalisation, which were moreover validated by this perception of a freer and more prosperous society in other countries. The reformers of the Kremlin were well aware of this: the constant comparison and contrast between the two worlds, their productions, cultures and ways of life, penetrated in the daily life thanks to mass media and there was no way to avoid it, which is why in “several socialist countries there was already a rejection of political institutions and ideological values by society”.[37] Gorbačëv himself was

pushing his reforms far beyond the Soviet tradition. On 17th July Gorbačëv told the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries that the schemes of the Cold War were no longer working: the blocs would come closer – and ultimately dissolve – in pan-European cooperation.[38] Gorbačëv’s humanitarian conception of socialism, with the consequent choice of international pacification, excluded the use of violence. In January 1989, on the twentieth anniversary of Jan Palach’s suicide in Wenceslas Square, Havel and thirteen other Charter 77 activists were arrested and once again imprisoned (though, in contrast with the harsh treatment meted out to him in earlier years, Havel—now an international figure whose mistreatment might embarrass his jailers—was released in May).[39] In the following months, and in particular during summer 1989, informal networks and groups sprang up around the country. The Velvet Revolution began on 17th November 1989, the fiftieth anniversary of the shooting of nine Czech representatives of the student movement and the closure of universities by the Nazis.[40] A large demonstration of university students took place in Prague, during which spontaneous demonstrations of aversion to the oppressive regime were brutally dispersed by the police. The event was attended by 20,000 people, most of them students, who lit candles in the terraced gardens and in the spires of the church in Vyšehrad and sang the National Anthem; they descended from the hills and at the National Theatre they took the Národní třída, the street whose name would become famous all over the world hours later.[41] The crowd stopped a few steps away from the wall of policemen. Then, from the back, the security forces and officers, who had promised not to intervene, advanced.[42] An official announcement on state television later declared that order had been restored and that 38 people had been hospitalised for “minor injuries”.[43] This protest was the beginning of the so-called Velvet Revolution. Everything started with citizens’ manifestations and also ended with them. The proof that the people did not stand still in front of the wind of change that was beginning to blow as it did in 1968, but the whole of Prague took to the streets with the same demand: more freedom, no censorship, more rights. Black Friday, the name by which it would become famous on the night of November 17th, was the spark that set Czechoslovakia on fire. In the days after, the population began to blame this intervention with written protests, an investigation was needed, but the public declaration of the fight against the communist regime only came about with strikes by university students who counted on propaganda and information, rather than on the use of violence.[44] On 18th November, the Civic Forum (a political party founded in that year to unite the opposition forces to the communist regime) in Prague and the Public Opinion against Violence in Bratislava, which was joined by members of Charter 77, students and intellectuals, debuted as representatives of the opposition movement and on 21st November, the first official meeting of the Civic Forum took place with the Prime Minister, who personally guaranteed that no violence would be used against the people. A mass demonstration organised by the Civic Forum took place on Wenceslas Square in the centre

of Prague.[45] On November 24th, silence fell on Wenceslas Square when a figure from the past emerged from Czechoslovak history. On *Svobodne Slovo*‘s balcony Alexander Dubček appeared to speak to his fellow countrymen in their capital for the first time in twenty-one years.[46] He spoke about freedom and democracy and urged them to overthrow the Stalinist regime that had dominated Czechoslovakia since 1948. Havel’s speech contained a brief summary of the general objectives of the Forum and were an instructive guide to the mood and priorities of the men and women of 1989. That demonstration ended with the national anthem and the bizarre tinkling music produced by half a million people waving their house keys. On 27th November 1989 there was another huge and important event on *Letna* hill. From *Letna* a walk started down the castle and along the strange *Malà Strana*. A silent human chain headed towards Wenceslas Square, with candles that lit the night and reminded us of November 17th. From there began the new phase of the Velvet Revolution, which from a spontaneous expression of support turned into a calculated political theatre, and, as Václav Havel said in October: “at the moment of truth, masks will fall revealing perhaps intelligent and very human faces”.[47] Within a week of the bloody repression of the student demonstrators the Party leadership had resigned. The dismantling of the regime was completed on the 29th, when the Parliament elected Havel as President of the Republic.[48] Under the pressure of public opinion, the CCP also drew a number of its deputies from the legislative bodies, in whose place the representatives of the new political forces were co-opted. Havel was the face of Eastern European consciousness, a legend of his time. The definitive confirmation of the regime change was given by the elections for the Federal Assembly and both National Councils (Czech Republic and Slovakia), the first free parliamentary elections after almost 45 years, which were held on 8th and 9 June 1990. Both main movements won with an overwhelming majority. The Velvet Revolution thus ended the Cold War in Czechoslovakia. Havel was president until 1992 and then, from 1993 to 2003 of the present Czech Republic. He became the symbol of the Revolution and finally led to true freedom in Czechoslovakia, a country that suffered two occupations (the Nazi one during the World War II and the Soviet one).

4. The Czechoslovak Communist Party Journal “Rudé právo”

“Rudé právo”, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the most important one before the collapse of the Soviet Union, adapted to the voices and demands for freedom and rights within the country in the years of revolution 1968 and 1989. The periodical was published by the organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and above the title in each page there was the well-known communist slogan *Proletáři všech zemí, spojte se* (Proletarians of all countries, unite!). It is interesting to note that each item was stuck to the other and all the available space on the page was

used, as if to save paper. The newspaper was published in black and white and the red colour for the headlines of the articles was used only for really important events and before the name of the newspaper, there was the emblem of the Communist Party with the Czechoslovakian flag, hammer and sickle.[49] The date, year, number and price of the daily were written under the title. The content of the newspaper was strongly ideological, as could also be seen from the regular use in articles and titles of the word *soudruh* (comrade). “Rudé právo” was important in the structure of the Czechoslovak press not only as the central organ of the Communist Party’s press, but also because stricter standards were placed on this newspaper and its editorial staff and was to be a model for other newspapers. One copy costed 30 Hellers in 1957, Sunday’s issue in 1957 was worth 50 Hellers. The journal was printed on a large format, one page measuring approximately 42 cm x 58.5 cm. The content stratification of sections was quite firmly stable: in the first pages there were mainly news from Czechoslovakia and important news from abroad, foreign articles were also placed on the following pages; the space was also dedicated to comments and letters from readers.[50] Very often the speeches of Czechoslovak and Soviet statesmen were printed in full, so the extensive form of the speeches occupied the entire page of the journal. Reports from the homeland mainly concerned the implementation of the Five-Year Plan, in particular agriculture and industry, reports from abroad very often concerned world news, disarmament and military events; the last page of the journal was traditionally devoted to sports.[51] “Rudé právo” did not emerge suddenly, it was not established as a new periodical, but evolved from another periodical, namely “Práva lidu” (People’s rights). On 18th September 1920, the chairman of the party’s executive committee, Antoním Němec, vacated his office that day and posted a call in “Práva lidu” editorial office that those who did not sympathize with the party’s left wing leave the newsroom and the *Lidový dům* together with him; while the sympathizers of the left remained in *Lidový dům* and also published a daily on this day called “Staré Právo lidu” (Old People Law).[52] “Staré Právo lidu” was published the next day, but there was a message in it that the publication of the “Staré Právo lidu” should be prevented, as one of the right-wing leaders of the Social Democracy, Dr. Meissner, asked the police on September 18th to intervene against the editorial staff of the “Staré Právo lidu”. The header was next to the number 1 in parentheses, the number 214. Thus, the editors of “Rudé právo” indicated that the new letter was considered a continuation of the tradition of the “Rudé právo”.[53] It was important that the word *právo* (law) remained in the title of the newspaper because people called the popular law simply “law”, and then *rudé* (red) was added, in reference to working class, socialist law. Unlike other political dailies, the publisher of “Rudé právo” was not a party, but specific individuals.[54] On May 6th, the first issue of “Rudé právo” was published, the celebratory slogans “We will persevere and win” or “Long live the Red Army!”, which were soon replaced by agitation slogans supporting the Communist Party in the upcoming elections, which were written on May 26th

1946, party building slogans.[55] “Rudé právo” was a newspaper that enjoyed the absolute support of the Party and the government in communist Czechoslovakia after the events of February 1948. The media were a powerful manipulator to control society and the pace of full democracy and the means of communication that influenced the public population in the mainland and the radio. Since the mid-1960s, “Rudé právo” editors and staff had to deal with new problems in their work that the period of gradual “liberation” had brought, and which they had not encountered since the communist coup. The main administration of press supervision lost its influence during this period and was unable to face the new demands of editors who wanted to reflect the incipient “liberalization” in their periodicals.[56] Although “Rudé právo” remained in line with the political delineation of the CCP, it had to respond appropriately to these changes and take a clear position on them; however, in the course of 1967, it retained its former way of working with information. It had instructional editorials for party officials and members as a guide to political work or professional activity in carrying out the plan and other tasks.[57] In second place, in terms of significance there were ideological articles, which only more educated functionaries and Party members were able write and manage, accustomed to the need to know the opinions and instructions from above.[58] Focusing on the role of censorship, Rudé právo adapted to the changes that took place within the Party in the year 1968 (in particular thanks to the election of Dubček as First Secretary of the Party). The legacy of censorship started during 1967 and it kept his old way of working with information; only in January of the following year did this newspaper begin to respond to political changes in accordance with the civic attitudes of the majority.[59] It is interesting to note that already in the mid-1960s there was a need to introduce a new legislative framework that would regulate the “pro-reform” trends of many newspapers, a proposal that only took place in 1966. The law became effective only in June 1968 and there were not only publication obligations, but also a definition of censorship. Now the state not only recognized the existence of institutionalized censorship, but officially defined its powers and legalized it.[60] At the end of June 1968, the introduction of the legacy of censorship is one of the events that responded to the growing requests of freedom of information and expression. The first state of complete abolition of censorship, Act No. 84/1968 Coll. of 26th June 1968 was stable in §17: “The censorship is inadmissible”, which Rudé právo published successfully in an article entitled *Zákaz cenzury potvrzen zákonem* (Prohibition of censorship confirmed by law).[61] However, a new office called Central Administration of Publications was introduced. It was composed by censorship officials who had to make decisions and give recommendations, against which (in case of disagreement) the editor-in-chief could turn to the relevant employee of the Party apparatus, who decided on the matter. A non-public novelty was the regular sending of information to the censorship office to selected communist officials. The Central Publications Administration office followed rules defined by law: it must be careful and not disclose information containing

facts that could constitute a state, economic or professional secret. Only on bases like these, the office had the right to suspend publication (even if its decisions were also subject to review), otherwise the Central Administration would only have had the opportunity to draw attention to inadequate information. These facts have been kept secret from the public and “Rudé právo” remained therefore unchanged by this reform, even though the editors in charge of other periodicals (especially culture-oriented ones) were increasingly ignoring the warnings of the Central Administration of Publications.[62] As a matter of fact, “Rudé právo” condemned the new law of censorship, as reported in its articles of June 1968, in which it affirmed the right of citizens to receive truthful information and denounced the existence of censorship. The political changes that took place at the beginning of January 1968 took a rapid turn right after Antonín Novotný left the position of the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the appointment of Alexander Dubček to his place, which took place at the Central Committee of the Communist Party on 5th January. In 1968 the editor of the newspaper was Oldřich Švestka, who had participated in the battle against Novotný, but already in April, when he changed the composition of the presidency, he distanced himself from his previous pro-reformist attitude. He was very unpopular among intellectuals and editors of the newspaper and this accelerated his political turn between March and August, when he reached the bottom of his career, joining the pro-Soviet conspiracy.[63] During the first half of 1968, the periodical also changed its position of absolute agreement with the Communist Party’s policy and, like other periodicals (albeit to a much lesser extent), reported on the necessary political changes.

5. “Rudé právo” in 1989: how the newspaper remembers the Prague Spring

In the 1989 edition of “Rudé právo”, there were many references to the past, particularly the events of 1968. There were references both to remember that socialism remained standing despite the reforming tendencies of 1968, which had tried to overthrow it, but also that the mistakes made in that year were reported, especially since as early as January 1989 that wind of change that had already been blowing twenty years earlier returned to Prague. Of course, after the Prague Spring, Party control of the media continued, indeed increased; in fact, the Czechoslovak public did not perceive this process as having ended since the August invasion, and there was a tendency within media structures and the cultural sphere to maintain the liberal spirit of the late 1960s as long as possible. The leadership led by Husák in 1989 asserted that after August 1968 the so-called right-wing forces were “still very brazen and bold” and thus, the consequence was a more controlled form of mass media in general.[64] For the mass media, and in particular the newspapers, it was important to make the citizen identify with the socialist reality as an internal psychological need, so that the socialist world would satisfy, as much as possible, the universal moral creed, allowing to

forget the physical and cultural victims of the end of August 1968. In the years after 1968, one of the primary tasks with the help of the media – and “Rudé právo” was the main press organ – was the semblance of developmental integrity and common morals – or so-called “cohesive” unification in all Eastern Bloc states for the proclaimed construction of socialism.[65] Thus, the activity of “Rudé právo” was not only to effectively promote so-called patriotic socialism, but also with it proletarian internationalism – which meant the occasional worship of the USSR as the guarantor of world progress, and so it continued until 1989. The very first month of 1989 indicated to the party leadership in Prague how quickly the conditional loyalty of the majority society changed to a limited rejection. A few days before Palach Week, which began on January 15th 1989, the events surrounding Jan Palach’s act were mentioned in “Rudé právo” as unnecessary “burns of twenty years ago.”[66] Not only that, in January 1989, “Rudé právo“ called Palach’s death a reckless gesture, a personal tragedy and a senseless suicide, but after years of dullness and passivity, public opinion manifested a new desire to know the reasons for so much fury, and the attempts of the normalisers to adopt reformist attitudes in order to keep up with Moscow’s political evolution were met with indifference, scepticism and mistrust on the part of the citizens.[67] The next day, the dispersal of the demonstration was justified by alleged threats also the following articles, severely condemning the participants in the demonstrations and pointing out the “elements” that disrupt the peaceful life of Prague. In an article recalling the troops’ occupation in Prague in August 1968, the newspaper is very clear that the occupation at that time was not improper or exaggerated. The article is on the front page of the daily of 30th October 1989, when the newspaper and the Party had not yet really spoken about the events and violence of August 1968. The newspaper “Rudé právo”, as it has been said, was often contradictory in its reporting and in particular in reference to the events of the Prague Spring. The article, entitled Evaluation of the Year 1968 accepted, is located at the bottom of the page, as if it should remain hidden from the reader. The 1968 occupation in Prague was later compared to the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan during the war.

The Soviet Union respects the Czechoslovak assessment of the events of 1968. This was stated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Eduard Sevardnadze on Friday in a published interview he gave to the editor-in-chief of *Solidarity Gazeta* Wyborcza Adam Michnik. The decision on the entry of Allied troops into Czechoslovakia was taken jointly. These decisions were taken in 1968 by the leaders of the Warsaw Pact state: the then general secretaries of the party and the chairman of the defence councils. The evaluation of these events from today’s positions can only be changed by a joint decision. The entry of the Czech troops into Czechoslovakia cannot be compared to the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan, he emphasized in response to the suggestive question of *Gazeta Wyborczi* E. Sevardnadze. The decision on the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, which I consider reckless and improper because it did not take into account the overall situation, was made in other historical conditions. Czechoslovakia is a sovereign state and has the inalienable right to evaluate its history

independently, stressed E. Sevardnaze.[68]

An article of 27th October 1989 entitled *dedici a pokracovatele*, or Heirs and Successors, commemorates the celebrations of 28th October 1918, when Czechoslovakia became an independent state with the First Republic. The article in question takes up half the available space in the front page, the title and text are in bold, as if to show the importance of the topic on the day preceding the all-important Czech holiday. On this day in 1918, at the end of the First World War, Czechoslovakia was declared independent. The article recalls Czech and Slovakian festivities and how both the Czech and Slovakian nations were able to develop their own social, economic and cultural life within a single state. The article also emphasises the way in which the federation was able to improve the social and economic conditions of the country and the process of democratisation, referring to these past 21 years, thus despite the events of 1968.

In our latest history – 21 years ago – the significance of the famous October date was highlighted by the approval of the Constitutional Act on the Czechoslovak Federation. This created further convenient conditions for both nations – Czech and Slovak – to be able to develop all forms and areas of national social life in the Czechoslovak state – to find their expression in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres. The Czechoslovak state was thus developed by another value, the importance of which we appreciate not only from the point of view of our own, but also from other people’s experiences. […] Our federation will have to prove its function in the conditions of the new organization of social production on the basis of state enterprises and in increasing the economic independence of the territorial bodies of state power – national committees. […] We must use all resources to accelerate the development of our society through reconstruction and democratization.[69]

“Rudé právo” then often recalled the events of 1968, in particular the occupation in August, emphasizing the need not to repeat them, especially because of the violence and social instability to which they would have led, as recalled in an article from November 1989. The article is on the front page of the newspaper and the title is in bold. It is a very long article; in fact, it takes up almost half a full page. It is accompanied by a photo of Ladislav Adamec, who at that time was Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia (until December 1989 when he became President of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia).

An assessment of all the contexts of August 1968 cannot be the subject of a new resolution, but of an in-depth collective evaluation by the group of historians from the countries concerned. This step is also necessary to reduce social tensions in order to facilitate dialogue on the serious social problems of today and tomorrow.[70]

The events of 1989, were not so different from those of 1968. The desire for freedom that had been ignited in 1968 was reawakened in the citizens of Prague and many took to the streets in protest between November and December. They asked, once again, for the total

abolition of censorship. The media never engaged as they should have and often simply added fuel to the fire regarding the events in Prague and, even remembering the events of the Prague Spring, it was incumbent upon journalists to write about all events truthfully and impartially; only in this way would the spread of rumours be avoided and help the party gain the trust of all the people of our country.[71] “Rudé právo” reported on the ongoing occupation of the country by foreign troops, dissenting opinions and criticism of these events, however conflicting articles were written during the fall of 1989. After the August occupation, the emerging Normalization regime was looking for ways to restore the media to its rightful role according to the Soviet model of the relationship between media and politics, and of course in addition to the political and personal consequences for the “reformist” communists, the situation also affected the media.[72] At the beginning of 1989 there were articles denouncing the violence of August 1989, as in an article that reported the speech of the CSSR Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec.

> In our society there are different opinions on the question of a military solution to the situation in August 1968. No one has instructed me to take a position on this challenging and complex event. A lot has changed in 21 years, we live in a different world. […] Personally, I am of the opinion that we must re-evaluate the legitimacy of the entry of troops from the five states into the territory of our republic and the possibilities of a political solution to this problem. Therefore, I want to propose to the Federal Government that it take a principled position on the solution then of the crisis situation in our country. […] I also support the rapid opening of bilateral negotiations with the government of the Soviet Union on an intergovernmental agreement on the temporary stay of Soviet troops on the territory of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. However, the departure of Soviet troops must be in line with the progress of the pan-European disarmament process.[73]

Other articles, however, found necessary to underline the need to recognize the importance of socialism and its contribution to society, as in a later article on the 23rd November, bringing attention back to Marxism-Leninism imposed by former President of Czechoslovakia and Head of the Communist Party Klement Gottwald. The article is on the second page, so not strictly among the most important ones. It is an interview in a school with students and teachers who had set up a strike committee for the student demonstrations in November.

> The past has taught us that any deviation from Marxism-Leninism has usually been accompanied by an attack on the Gottwald tradition, a reduction and contempt for the importance of Kelement Gottwald’s personality and work.[74]

However, the difference began to be felt at the beginning of December 1989, the editorial staff of “Rudé právo”, so even the Communist Party itself, admitted some mistakes and shortcomings: “It turned out that the events of the previous months and weeks that we

witnessed in neighbouring countries influenced public opinion in our country, especially a large part of the young generation”.[75] “Rudé právo” therefore believed in the idea that for the sake of a concrete policy in which not only the successes but also the mistakes and errors were manifested, one must be able to look face to face. This can be seen in a December article, which explicitly took up the word “mistakes” in reference to corruption and control by the Party in Czechoslovakia. The article is very short and is located in the corner of the front page. However, the title How to Restore the Party Authority? is very interesting, despite the fact that the article itself is not given much prominence.

> There is a clear need to reject the mistakes and errors of the past, including their bearer, and to immediately get rid of the cancerous ulcer that is corruption. […] In this context, submit proposals to the CSSR government for the immediate withdrawal of all compromised persons from the diplomatic services. Only by such a radical cleansing of its ranks will the party prove its moral strength. The CCP must fight for all people in the street, for honest communists and oppose their scandalisation in the workplace.[76]

An article from 31st October 1989, before the outbreak of the Velvet Revolution, makes a reflection on the past and the difference of the new generations. The article is very short and can be found on the fifth page of the newspaper, where one usually finds national and foreign news. It recalls how the newspaper itself published articles from October 1967 and 1969 (scrupulously avoiding mentioning 1968) to recall the importance of the Czechoslovak holiday of 28th October, which made Czechoslovakia a country that, despite the ideological struggle, managed to maintain solid socialism.

> In twenty years, a new generation has grown up. For some of them, the events of the then complex time are only austere, even textbook sentences. The day, which has so painfully tested the opinions and attitudes of many people and the character of our communist party, is known only by a struggle. “Rudé právo” published more than fifty articles about October 1967 and 1969 from October 1987 to April 1989. They are summarized in this book as an opportunity for someone to first think about the paths that led our society into crisis, and the paths that led it to brought about this crisis. Human memory has no right to forget them. Among other things, also because, over time, they continue to be the subject of a sharp ideological struggle at home and beyond.[77]

1989 in the “Rudé právo” is thus characterized by conflicting arguments, as, moreover, was the case in 1968. These were years characterized by radical change processes and 1989, with the new line of thinking introduced by Gorbačëv, made the media also adapt to his new policy of openness, but with a slow and gradual process that characterizes every revolution. The main role of Gorbačëv was played by the new thinking in the foreign policy of the USSR in the negotiations on security and disarmament and, precisely because the new thinking concerned the foreign policy of the USSR, the “Rudé právo” informed about this variable in

relation to other issues, especially with a disarmament initiative.[78] For example, Sdenek Mlymnar, General Secretary of the Central Committee in 1968, wrote in “Rudé právo” that the Communist Party was to be transformed, to be like “a general light within which social organisations and citizens will have the right not only to support their own needs and express their own thoughts, but also to make decisions independently and responsibly”, meaning the end of the political monopoly on politics.[79]
The purpose of this analysis with reference to 1989 was to underline the historical connection the newspaper made between 1989 and 1968, as the two events were closely linked from the point of view of the newspaper’s communication. As Dubček argued in an interview in 1989: “The future is not based on 21st August 1968, but on a new political and programmatic way forward. To look at the historical truth to the end, with loyalty and I think that with different choices, it is difficult to expect people to trust the Czechoslovak restructuring”.[80] The most significant changes within the newspaper occurred in the months of November and December 1989, which were the ones that kicked off the Velvet Revolution and concluded at the end of the year with the election of Václav Havel, who christened the Czechoslovak uprising of November 1989 the “Velvet revolution”, which more generally followed the course of Czechoslovak politics.[81] Václav Havel coined the term “post-totalitarian” to define the general pressure to conform that the regimes exerted on their subjects.[82] Just as with the Prague Spring, the newspaper also reproduced the figure of Havel in an inconstant manner during 1989, when he was elected and became the hero of his country. The totalitarian socialist regime was also dissolved thanks to his group of dissidents who sought a third way. As his words remind us, “without being, as I said, the seeker of a third way, I am at the same time an opponent of slavish imitation, especially if it turns into ideology.”[83] The modern Czech Republic nostalgically remembers the Revolution and in the cafés all around Prague there are still photos of the president with the inscription *Havel na Hrad* (Havel at the Government), remembering the man who believed in democracy and revolution, as he recalled in his essay The Power of the Powerless: “Totalitarian society is the distorted mirror of the whole of modern civilization”.[84]

Note

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5. P. Boschesi, *Storia della Guerra Fredda (1945-1962)*, Mondadori Editore, Milano, 1977, p. 11.
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10. P. Cornej, J. Pokorny, *Breve storia delle terre ceche*, Práh, Praga, 2015, p. 67.
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12. D. Volcic, *1968 L’autunno di Praga*, Sellerio editore, Palermo, 2018, p. 23.
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15. A. Laudiero, *La Primavera di Praga e le sue stagioni*, Viella, Roma, 2018 p. 20.
16. D. Volcic, *L’autunno di Praga*, cit. p. 81.
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18. Ivi, p. 86.
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20. F. Romero, *Storia della Guerra Fredda. L’ultimo conflitto per l’Europa*, cit. p. 221.
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31. Ivi, p. 77.
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35. Ivi, p. 79.
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37. Ivi, p. 292.
38. F. Romero, *Storia della Guerra Fredda. L’ultimo conflitto per l’Europa*, cit. p. 292.
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