
Martin Schulze Wessel (Hg.), *The Prague Spring as a Laboratory*

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The Prague Spring was a period of political and societal liberalization that lasted from early 1968 until 21st August 1968, when the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact invaded the ČSSR to put an end to the reform efforts. A common narrative on the Prague Spring is that it was a coherent and yet unsuccessful experiment, in which two groups—reformers and conservatives—were competing against each other. The democratic-minded reformers, led by Alexander Dubček, wanted to build a “socialism with a human face,” while the conservatives sought to inhibit any significant change.

Abstaining from such teleological and dichotomic interpretations, this edited volume characterizes the Prague Spring as a laboratory defined by a large variety of ideas and actors and by a large degree of uncertainty. Searching for interrelations between politics, science, economics, and culture, the 17 articles offer new and valuable insights into the Prague Spring and, taken as a whole, strongly substantiate the laboratory hypothesis. However, if we consider each article separately, we see that some articles have only punctually adapted this hypothesis, while others rely on it more clearly. This review’s focus will be on the latter.

A general explanation of why the Prague Spring can be defined as a laboratory is offered by Martin Schulze Wessel. According to him, the 1960s came along with a “rapid acceleration of time and a broadening of spatial ideational horizons” (p. 2). Thus, reality overtook programmatic work, which turned out to be a serious though not insuperable challenge for the political leadership. Referring to Koselleck’s concepts of experience and expectation, Schulze Wessel points out that in post-Stalinist

times there had developed a large gap between what people expected from socialism and what they actually experienced. Then, the Prague Spring brought back the “hope that an orderly yet progressive tension between space of experience and horizon of expectation could be maintained” (p. 11). Moreover, Schulze Wessel emphasizes the heterogeneity of the main reform concepts, which were developed by working groups appointed by the Communist Party and directed by renowned researchers: The group led by Radovan Richta imagined a “bright new future,” Ota Šik and his colleagues opted for the “bitter medicine of economic reform,” and Zdeněk Mlynář’s group drafted “timeless principles for good government” (p. 17).

Vítězslav Sommer more closely analyzes the role of expert cultures, indicating that technocratic tendencies had a decisive impact before, during, and after the Prague Spring. Expert cultures had developed from the late 1950s on and were covering a wide range of disciplines and topics such as decentralization and the restructuring of the political and social system. The author explains that on an abstract level, the experts were imagining the future of socialism, while on a more concrete level they wanted “to build a socialism that would be economically efficient and administered by well-organized, flexible institutions” (p. 49). Also, they tried to predict and thus direct future economic and political trends. Sommer concludes that this technocratic reform concept was problematic in at least two regards: First, it did not always adhere well to democratic ideas (e. g., when work is foremost about efficiency, “bad” and “good” workers cannot be viewed as equal). Second, scientists not only played an important role before, but also after the Soviet-led invasion. Thus, expert cultures contributed to both the liberalization of the 1960s and to the authoritarian stability of the 1970s.

Another perspective on technocratic tendencies is introduced by Johannes Gleixner. He explains that during the 1960s, two lines of reformist thought emerged: one searching for a distinct path for the socialist economy and another one relying on market-based thinking. Remarkably, after 1968, the first one disappeared, while the second one was

transformed into an economist field called prognostics (after 1989/90, some of its representatives, such as Václav Klaus or Tomáš Ježek, became high-ranking politicians). In conclusion, Gleixner compares the Czechoslovakian developments of the 1960s to Western developments following the oil crisis: One common feature he identifies is a shift in values, namely the loss of confidence in the state's ability to manage the economy directly. Considering this similarity, he finds it "debatable," whether the reformist changes in Czechoslovakia should be interpreted only as a technocratic turn specific to a socialist system. Instead, he suggests interpreting these changes as a "shift in values emerging earlier and more openly in socialism" than in the West (p. 66).

Turning away from mostly economic debates, Jan Mervart directs his attention to the role of intellectuals in the reform process. A principal assumption of his article is that the Prague Spring should not be understood as "a completely exceptional event," but rather as "a constituent element in the movement that was occurring within the framework of post-Stalinist thinking." Thus, the Prague Spring is defined as an "emancipatory endeavor in search of a model of democratic socialism" (p. 99). According to Mervart, this search had already begun in the mid-1950s, resulting in a broad range of reform communist approaches. One of these approaches was the humanistic or radical democratic approach, which emphasized free self-realization within the framework of a socialist society. Mervart explains that the proponents of this approach were originally aiming for a truly Marxist and thus critical analysis, but were ultimately unable to break with the party, or with the system, and remained politically marginal. Nevertheless, they imagined a positive socialist future, which the author defines as an important feature of the Prague Spring as a whole.

Radical democratic approaches are also the focus of Ivan Landa's article. He points out that when retrospectively assessing the Prague Spring, many radical democrats identified it as an incomplete social revolution. Calling it a revolution was deemed appropriate because the Prague Spring had set off a profound political and social transformation,

and because revolutionary tendencies continued to exist even after the occupation. Thus, the radical democrats came up with an interpretation that was different from more common interpretations (e. g., the “standard” one which followed the reformist self-understanding, or the “liberal” one according to which the Prague Spring was primarily about introducing elements of Western democracies) (p. 124). However, there were also contradictions and problems associated with the radical democratic approach. First, Landa mentions that the radical democrats “merely replaced the paternalism of the party with the paternalism of the intelligentsia” (p. 141). Second—and similar to Mervart—, he doubts that the radical democrats actually wanted fundamental change in the political system.

Turning away from the role of scholars and intellectuals, Anna Bischof deals with *Radio Free Europe* (RFE), generally crediting it with a major impact on the Prague Spring. She explains that the RFE editorial team could, generally, decide its editorial policy relatively freely. However, this was not the case during the Prague Spring: At first, the editors had a critical attitude towards the reform movement; to them, the reformists were still communists. However, by early spring 1968, the radio management had pressured them to openly support the movement. This was considered beneficial because the reformers were expected to eventually overthrow the communist regime. In fact, the radio management limited its support to the less radical reformist ideas, as these were perceived to have better prospects of success. As Bischof shows, this led to a paradox situation: “The freer the media in Czechoslovakia became and the more open discussion in Czechoslovak society became, the more moderation and the more restraint RFE showed” (p. 206). After the Soviet-led invasion, RFE maintained its rather restrained position: Even though it strongly condemned the attack, it abstained from calls for resistance. Considering both the time before and after the invasion, Bischof concludes that RFE can “not be counted as among the radical forces of the time” (p. 210).

Another media actor is examined by H el ene Leclerc, who writes about the German-language culture magazine *Im Herzen Europas* (IHE). This magazine was mostly directed at Western Germans, encouraging them to buy Czechoslovak export products or travel to Czechoslovakia. At the same time, it “turned out to be a window on the events of the Prague Spring” (p. 216) and generally reflected the golden age of Czechoslovak culture during the 1960s (e. g., by distancing itself from Stalinism and by paying more attention to Slovak matters). Although IHE did not openly criticize the regime (there was only little coverage of the “Two Thousand Words,” a manifesto written by reformist writer Ludv ik Vacul ik and signed by hundreds of public figures and more than 100,000 ordinary citizens), it functioned as a laboratory of reform: Featuring forums and discussion, there was an emphasis on dialog and on giving voice to the actors in the reform process. Acting as “mouthpiece and forum of the reform movement” (p. 221), IHE’s desire to support reforms also continued after the Soviet-led invasion. Despite sanctions against members of the editorial team, a clear positioning against the anti-reformist backlash was maintained until around mid-1969. However, as Leclerc explains, the “normalization” of the regime did not spare IHE. Its muzzling by the authorities was finalized by a change of name (“*Tschechoslowakisches Leben*”).

Daria Volf analyzes the general role of the media before and during the Prague Spring, showing that a first shift in the media discourse had already taken place in the mid-1950s, when some critics started to position themselves against the strict orientation towards the Soviet model. Also, the image of the United States changed: While in the early 1950s the country was depicted in an entirely negative light, some years later, voices emerged that also found positive aspects in the West. At that time, the regime’s reactions were clear: Insubordinate journals were banned and censorship was exercised tenaciously. However, Volf points out that the critical shift during the 1950s was already a first step towards the reform process. At the same time, she stresses that there was no linear development leading from the mid-1950s to the time of the

Prague Spring, but that this phase was characterized by the regime's repeated attempts to preserve the status quo. However, when the reform process eventually began, Czechoslovak self-perception also changed: Generally, more self-criticism became possible (e. g. regarding the economic situation). Moreover, a discussion on the political and social future of the country began. Based on the proposition that neither the Western nor the Soviet model was entirely desirable, a particular Czechoslovak model of socialist democracy was envisaged.

The last article of the volume, written by Pavel Kolář, searches for new ways to interpret the Prague Spring. According to the author, many master narratives have proven to be problematic—for example, because they are ahistorical or explain the events primarily by looking at their outcome. As an example, Kolář mentions the common interpretation that the Prague Spring originally aimed to save socialism, but eventually turned out “to be the final nail in its coffin.” (p. 279). He finds the volume's approach far more promising as it takes into consideration aspects such as incoherence, contradictions, and uncertainties. However, Kolář also proposes examining the Prague Spring's long-term relevance for the European Left, both in the West and East. He explains that the Left frequently associates the Prague Spring with a major loss, resulting in a wave of disillusionment, even though it initially fueled hopes of genuinely establishing a democratic form of socialism. Instead, Kolář suggests approaching the legacy of the Prague Spring in a mourning rather than in a melancholic way (that is, not to long for what has been lost, but to learn to live with defeat), thus treating it as source of reconstruction and a way out of the current crisis.

Overall, this volume offers a variety of new perspectives on the Prague Spring, making it clear that this topic is still highly relevant to historical research. It also shows the benefit of innovative approaches: Most articles have evidently profited from the “laboratory model” and have therefore contributed to the deconstruction of old master narratives and to the search for new ones. Moreover, they paint a vivid picture of the reform period and its first precursory sparks from the mid-

1950s onward: between optimism and imagining a positive socialist future on the one hand and paternalist and technocratic approaches on the other hand. It would have been a great bonus to have an additional article at the end of the book bringing together the most important findings of each article and pointing out their similarities and dissimilarities. Such a final chapter might have even come to an overall conclusion and/or dealt with the question of how the laboratory hypothesis could be applied to reform periods in other East and also West European countries. In any case, the volume serves as proof that the potential of the laboratory hypothesis is not exhausted yet.

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