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The Weight of the Spring: "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" and the Fate of the Prague Spring

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Abstract

Two of the many watershed events Czechoslovakia experienced in the twentieth century were the 1968 Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion, which determined the course of the nation for the next twenty years. Czech author Milan Kundera experienced these events firsthand and recounted a narrative of the events in his 1984 novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Today, the novel remains an important work for its representation of the Spring and its philosophical discussion of the purpose of human life. Over the last fifty years, the Prague Spring has been represented by a variety of sources as a time of hopes raised and dashed, as a success and a failure, as a point of pride and shame. Its representation varies based on the political context of the day, though the idea of truth remains an important theme in the Spring's evaluation. The Spring's and the Invasion's inherent juxtapositions remain critical for a consideration of the nature of politics and destiny.

Keywords

Warsaw Pact Invasion, Milan Kundera, Two Thousand Words, Czech Destiny, Communist Party of Czechoslovakia

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Between 1918 and 1989, the former nation of Czechoslovakia experienced a series of events that were so disastrous that other countries could only watch them unfold in horror. From the Nazi occupation to the country's annexation by Stalin's USSR, the twentieth century was rife with watershed moments for the nation. Two such important events were the Prague Spring and the subsequent Warsaw Pact Invasion, which determined the course of the nation for the next twenty years.

After his election in January 1968, Alexander Dubček became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). As the leader of the nation, he instituted liberal reforms in order to create a program he called socialism with a human face. The reform period of 1968 became known as the Prague Spring. "To brutally simplify it," Czech author Petra Hůlova writes, "the Prague Spring was an attempt to enrich the existing Communist ideology and practice of central planning and censorship by adding certain democratic aspects of Western political systems, primarily freedom of speech."

Czech author Milan Kundera experienced the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion firsthand. He recounted a narrative of the events in his 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which was then adapted into a film in 1988. Neither was available in Czechoslovakia at the time of release because of the government's strict censorship policies. The film even features a performance by Pavel Landovský, a prominent Czech actor and dissident who was banned from acting in Czechoslovakia and later fled the country in fear of his life. Both the novel and the film tell the story of a couple, Tomaš and Tereza, who are living in Prague at the time of the Spring and the Invasion and who experience their consequences firsthand. Following the Warsaw Pact Invasion, Kundera remained committed to reforming Czechoslovak

socialism and made public statements about the role of the common citizen in this reform. However, neither Tomaš nor Tereza are particularly active in the Spring or its fallout, and Kundera himself emigrated in 1975 and was then stripped of his Czech citizenship. Because of his seemingly hypocritical political actions, he remains a controversial figure in the Czech Republic today. Nevertheless, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* remains an important work for its representation of the Spring and its philosophical discussion of the purpose of human life. Over the last fifty years, the Prague Spring has been represented by the novel, as well as by other sources, as a time of hopes raised and dashed, as a success and a failure, as a point of pride and shame. The political context of the day matters in an evaluation of the Spring, as does the idea of truth.

The liberalizations of the Prague Spring, Czechoslovaks of the 1960s thought, had been a long time coming. For twenty years, "the Russian empire had been committ[ing crimes] under the cover of a discreet shadow. The deportation of a million Lithuanians, the murder of hundreds of thousands of Poles, the liquidation of the Crimean Tatars," as well as the expulsion of Germans from the Sudetenland and the show trials of the 1950s, hung over the Czechoslovaks like an ever-present warning (Kundera 67). Throughout the sixties, writers and intellectuals demanded an end to literary censorship and the reinstatement of freedom of the press. Dubček, sympathetic to these desires, abolished censorship, enacted political and economic restructuring, and inspired a renewal of civic optimism (West 401).

The country's emphasis on reforms relating to art and intellect reflected a long tradition of the Czech identity being tied up with the written word. In the year 863, Duke Rostislav appealed to the Byzantine emperor Michael III to send Slavic-speaking missionaries to teach the

gospel in the local language. Jan Hus's insistence that Christian texts should be in local language at the turn of the fifteenth century echoed Rostislav's claims. During the Czech National Revival of the late 1800s, Tomaš Masaryk, the future first president of the Czechoslovak Republic, reflected on this long history and questioned the role of the nation in anticipation of reactions to the fallout from the Prague Spring (West 406).

During the 1950s and 1960s, only certain writers and themes were approved for publication by the KSČ. Art and literature had to display life with a purpose: "ideological molding and education of the working people in the spirit of socialism" (Behr 16). Realism in this education was key, as "art that was not realistic was said to sap the foundations of socialism" (Kundera 63). And yet it was also deeply idealistic. About a theory of socialist art, Kundera writes,

> Soviet society had made such progress that the basic conflict was no longer between good and evil but between good and better. So shit (that is, whatever is essentially unacceptable) could exist only 'on the other side' (in America, for instance) … Soviet films … were saturated with incredible innocence and chastity … they showed the Communist ideal, whereas Communist reality was worse. (253)

By striving to depict what was in addition to the ideal, Soviet Socialist Realist art created a "fatal split" that led art to depict a "modal schizophrenia" (West 426). According to such standards, even Franz Kafka, today one of Prague's quintessential writers, was banned. Kafka's absurdist works strip down existence until readers realize that humans do not and cannot know anything. This conclusion presented a problem for the Communists, who lived by "a political doctrine which is convinced that theirs is the only truth," and such a doctrine "must necessarily

fail when confronted with and applied to a work of art which consists of questions we are not expected to answer" (Behr 18). Eminent Czech writer Jan Procházka, in support of Kafka and general literary freedom, proclaimed, "literature must be a disturbing voice … If society wants to be heard, it must grant its writers a free voice, because it is their privilege to project society's heart as well as its anger" (Behr 27). His words continue to ring true as a description of dissent before, during, and after the Prague Spring.

Heda Margolius Kovály, living in Prague in the sixties, attended a public lecture on crime in late 1967. "It was at this meeting that I first became aware of the spontaneous solidarity of the dissent which had started to grow and which reached its climax when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia," she recalls (179). "The spring of 1968 had all the intensity, anxiety and unreality of a dream come true" as people began to realize what Dubček's liberalizations could mean for their future (180). Still, people were nervous. She remembers a conversation where one friend described "the same joy on every face, the same happiness … and the same fear that they'll lose it all" (182).

Certainly, the Czechoslovaks had a right to be nervous. For years, political unity was encouraged across the Eastern Bloc, though the USSR remained the unspoken model for society and politics throughout the region. The Prague Spring challenged Russian authority, the Czechs even seeing themselves as a vanguard (Applebaum 214). They even dared to publish a "glorious manifesto" that became known as the "Two Thousand Words." Kundera writes, "It called for the radical democratization of the Communist regime. First it was signed by a number of intellectuals, and then other people came forward and asked to sign, and finally there were so many signatures that no one could quite count them up" (Kundera 212). It was written by

popular author Ludvík Vaculík and published in June 1968. Vaculík wrote scathingly of the KSČ, "It would not have mattered so much that they lacked adequate experience in affairs of state, factual knowledge, or philosophical education, if only they had had enough common prudence and decency to listen to the opinions of others and agree to being gradually replaced by more able people" (Navrátil 177). Though he praised the Spring, he reminded readers why it was necessary:

> It started inside the communist party, that much we must admit, even those communists among us who no longer had hopes that anything good could emerge from this quarter know this. It must be added, of course, that the process could have started nowhere else. For after twenty years the communists were the only ones able to conduct some sort of political activity. (179)

In late July, British journalist Gavin Young documented the Prague Spring in a *Guardian* article titled, "Joy comes back to Prague after 20 years of silence." "The Czechs are joyously making up for the almost unimaginable loneliness of 20 long years of State-imposed silence," he wrote passionately. "United as never before, with very few dissenters, the nation has rallied euphorically behind a Communist Government to shake off, bloodlessly, a mind-numbing tyranny." Workers recalled how, a year ago, they would have been arrested for speaking to him, and how they had faced discrimination for not being members of the Communist Party. Still, like Kováły, they were hesitant. "Dubček's good," they said. "We should have freedom to talk and think. But, of course, we must wait and see how things go."

Things did not go well. Less than a month later, on August 21, was the Warsaw Pact Invasion. Eight Eastern Bloc countries had signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and

Mutual Assistance, a defense pact created in reaction to NATO, and they invaded fellow signatory Czechoslovakia to suppress Dubček's reforms. "How are we going to greet them?" Vaculík recalls a cousin asking dryly in response to the news. "We've drunk all the slivovitz and we don't have any hand grenades" (Vaculík). The film version of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* shows actual footage of the Invasion, of tanks rolling down the street, statues wearing blindfolds, people lying injured on sidewalks, and protesters waving flags. The novel also describes the Invasion and its immediate consequences in great detail as a "drunken carnival of hate" and directly references how the event was captured on film (Kundera 26). "Czech photographers and cameramen were acutely aware that they were the ones who could best do the only things left to do: preserve the face of violence for the distant future." Photographers like Tereza "shot roll after roll and a gave about half of them, undeveloped, to foreign journalists (the borders were still open, and reporters passing through were grateful for any kind of document)" (67). Some even fought over her rolls, and once, she was arrested "and kept overnight at Russian military headquarters. There they threatened to shoot her, but no sooner did they let her go that she was back in the streets with her camera" (25).

Kovály describes the Invasion with similar passion and anger. "I felt that this was the supreme moment of our lives. During the night of the invasion, when we lost everything, we found something that people in our world hardly dare to hope for: ourselves and each other," she wrote of participating in the protests (Kovály 188). She describes how the Czechs spray-painted Soviet license plate numbers on walls, secretly broadcast radio and television reports, and refused soldiers food (188). They also removed or changed street signs to confuse the Russians. Tereza reflects later on this act of protest as "quite dangerous to the country" because "the streets

and buildings could no longer return to their original names," causing towns to "metamorphose into a miniature imaginary Russia" (Kundera 166). Such actions had a strong air of Kafkaesque absurdism to them. Indeed, the Invasion itself had "all the aspects of a Kafkaesque nightmare—except that it was reality. A friendly nation occupied a brother state to protect the inhabitants from themselves. The innocent were pronounced guilty, and the aggressors were declared to be friends and protectors. To use a Kafka quotation: 'A cage went in search of a bird'" (Behr 27).

In addition to the invasion, much of this protest occurred because Dubček, along with other government members, had been kidnapped. "The representatives of the country had been hauled away like criminals by the Russian army, no one knew where they were, everyone feared for the men's lives, and hatred for the Russians drugged people like alcohol" (Kundera 26). In Moscow, the Czechoslovaks found themselves signing a compromise agreement with the Russians known as the Moscow Protocol. "I was convinced that from the very first night the Soviet army was just itching for a confrontation, and that I must do what I could to prevent that from occurring," Dubček recalled later, justifying the Protocol (Navrátil 482). He was forced to announce the terms of the Protocol on air. "Finally on the evening of the seventh day, the voice of Dubček, the only man we trusted, came over the radio. It was a voice heavy with helplessness and defeat. We listened to the long pauses between the words and the barely audible sighs that told us more than the words," remembers Kováły (190). Kundera characterizes the speech similarly.

> He was so devastated after his six-day detention he could hardly talk; he kept stuttering and gasping for breath, making long pauses between sentences, pauses lasting nearly thirty seconds.

> The compromise saved the country from the worst: the executions and mass deportations to Siberia that had terrified everyone. But one thing was clear: the country would have to bow to the conqueror. Forever and ever, it will stutter, stammer, gasp for air like Alexander Dubček. The carnival was over. Workaday humiliation had begun. (Kundera 26)

"Darkness was settling over the lovely countryside, the homeland of despair," Kovály elaborates. "Someone had whitewashed a few words onto a fence near my street. 'Dearest Dubček,' they read. 'We understand'" (191). Kundera writes that, conversely, "everyone hated Dubček at that moment. They reproached him for compromising; they felt humiliated by his humiliation; his weakness offended them" (73). Whether the public pitied or cursed Dubček, "the spell under which the Soviets had held many die-hard true believers was broken for good. There would be no more illusions, no more self-deception about the nature of Big Brother. The grim reign of ideology was over" (Kovály 191).

An editorial in *The Guardian* reacted to the horror of the invasion from England. "After 50 years communism still means, in Soviet eyes, the rule of the tank and the jack-boot," the author writes scathingly. "It is a tragedy beyond description … a confession that communism cannot coexist with humaneness and tolerance." Vaculík echoed this sentiment, writing that the invasion was "perhaps even more important for Europe than for us, because it showed the Soviet Union for what it was. It showed that communism is unreformable. Western intellectuals with some degree of soberness had to realize that to talk about 'reformed' communism was foolishness" (West 416). People left the country in droves before the borders could be closed and their passports confiscated.

The Soviets claimed that Czechoslovak party leaders had requested "immediate assistance," which prompted their invasion, but such an appeal has never been seen. Outraged, the KSČ declared the invasion a denial of international legal norms (Svec 984). The Soviets responded in late September with the Brezhnev Doctrine, which read that "every Communist party is responsible not only to its own people but also to all socialist countries and to the entire Communist movement" (985). Rather than reassurance, Eastern Europe saw this as a sign that Moscow "would not abide by Marxism-Leninism in any consistent way, neither in its domestic nor foreign policy, but only use it, or twist it, in an attempt to impart seemingly noble motives to its increasingly cynical actions" (985). In October, another treaty allowed the indefinite stationing of Soviet troops in the country (West 414). Despite *The Guardian*'s editorial, international interest faded once the Soviet Union made its position clear. "But it's not over yet in Prague!" Tereza told a Swiss editor indignantly after fleeing the country. "Even with the country occupied, with everything against them," workers and students went on strike, still fighting for their rights, even as the editor refused to publish her photographs (Kundera 68). "It's a pity we're just getting them now," the editor says in the film, prioritizing what will sell rather than the conflict of a foreign country.

In December 1968, Kundera spoke out in a controversial essay titled "*Česky Uděl*," or "Czech Destiny," published in the KSČ-owned *Listy*. Echoing Masaryk's questions of decades before, he considered what the lot of the Czechs was. "The fate of the modern Czech nation has always been linked to culture so crucially and to a degree so unlike most other European nations that it is easily the most meditative and educated people in its half of Europe, one not easily deceived by cheap propaganda," he boasts in a recollection of Rostislav's and Hus's positions of

many centuries ago. Because of the Czechs strived for intellectual freedom and revised socialism, “the Czechs and Slovaks placed themselves at the center of world history for the first time since the Middle Ages and addressed the world with their challenge.” It is the Czech destiny to have such grandness but, since it is a small nation, to fail. “This gunfire is no bolt out of the blue, no shock, no absurdity, but rather something by which the age-old Czech destiny is realized yet again,” he laments of the invasion. The invasion “was, of course, more drastic than we’d anticipated, and the test which the new ethos underwent was severe.” However, it was the nation’s fate to use this failure and strive even higher: “I refuse to call it a national catastrophe, as our rather tearful public tends to do these days. I would even venture to say, in spite of public opinion, that the significance of the Prague Autumn may yet surpass the significance of the Prague Spring” (Kundera, “Czech Destiny”).

Vaclav Havel, playwright, dissident, and future president of democratic Czechoslovakia, could not have disagreed more. In February 1969, he published a response essay with the same title, but with a key difference: a provocative question mark, calling Kundera’s Czech destiny into doubt. He accused Kundera of what Jaroslav Střítecký calls “constructive forgetting,” or an assignment of the Party’s failing to outside forces rather than its own attributes (West 404). “How much easier it is to tell ourselves how good we were before August and how wonderfully we behaved in August (when along came the bad guys) than to examine how we actually are today, who among us remains good and who utterly is not and what we must do in order to be true to our prior achievements!” he exclaims (Havel).

> I don’t believe in fate and I’m of the opinion that we ourselves are the chief architects of our fortune, a situation from which we’re not excused by alibis such as the egoism of the

> great powers or our geography, or by allusions to our destiny which for centuries has been to dwell in limbo between sovereignty and subjugation. Again these are nothing more than abstractions that obscure our own concrete responsibility for our own concrete actions. (Havel)

He continues by directly attacking Kundera's argument that the Czech nation is so grand, so patriotic and unique, that its actions cannot be comprehended. Basic freedoms should not be radical, he argues, but normal.

> Supposedly our experiment was so far ahead of its time that we could not help but be misunderstood. What a sweet-smelling balm on our wounds! And what a pompous illusion it is too. Indeed, if we're going to imagine that a country has placed itself at the center of world history because it wishes to establish freedom of expression—something taken for granted in most of the civilized world—and to check the tyranny of its secret police, in all seriousness we shall become nothing more than self-complacent hacks, laughable in our provincial messianism! (Havel)

Kundera published another essay as a response to Havel entitled "Radicalism and Exhibitionism." "Whether or not we were equal to the task, whether our step was steady or faltering, we stepped into the center of world history," he defends, repeating his claim from "*Česky Uděl*." He writes that the Czech ideal of freedom of the press in a socialist country was something patriotic and unique and should not be undervalued. Returning to the Czech association with literature, Kundera argues that any Russian efforts to "de-Europeanize it," to censor the nation's creativity, "is to unhinge it from its own history." As for the development of politics since the Invasion, "the situation is troublesome (maybe more troublesome than I think),

but critical analysis in no way justifies our viewing it as a situation of lost hopes" (Kundera, "Radicalism").

Hope would be difficult to come by in the next twenty years of the Normalization period, however, especially after the events of early 1969. Charles University student Jan Palach self-immolated in Wenceslas Square on January 16 in protest of the invasion. On April 10, the Press and Information Committee announced the institution of a "provisional" policy of press monitoring to "preclude discourse that threatens the basic interests of our national affairs." On April 17, the KSČ Central Committee met to force Dubček to resign as First Secretary and to replace him with Gustav Husák (West 419).

"It is a fact which will go unrecorded by historians that the years following the Russian invasion were a period of funerals: the death rate soared," Kundera writes (229). Tomaš's purpose in life is killed; for writing an editorial condemning the Communists, he is no longer allowed to practice as a surgeon. Instead, he becomes a window washer. "Cowardice slowly becomes the rule of life," he says scathingly in the film when his colleagues assume he will sign the government-issued retraction statement that would allow him to continue practicing surgeries. Other people "died without being directly subjected to persecution; the hopelessness pervading the entire country penetrated the soul to the body, shattering the latter" (Kundera 229). Yet others "started being removed from their jobs, arrested, put on trial," and the secret police were everywhere (289). "All faith in Communism and love for Russia was dead," and the secret police did their best to exploit that (288).

Jan Procházka, the earlier defender of literary freedom, was one of the first to be targeted post-Invasion. As "one of the best-loved figures of the Prague Spring," the press chose him as the

subject of a smear campaign, and then radio broadcasts played private talks that had occurred in Procházka's apartment, which he had no idea was bugged (Kundera 133). Such invasion of privacy made people unsure of on whom they could rely. As former dissident and reporter Ivan Lamper described, the main characteristic of the communist regime was that people were alone; outside of childhood friends and family, no one was sure whom they could trust, and true information was hard to come by given that the only media was state media (Toocheck 15). The secret police often targeted family members of dissidents in order to keep people in line (Toocheck 18). Kundera describes the functions of the secret police as threefold. "The first is the classical one. They keep an ear out for what people are saying and report it to their superiors. The second function is intimidatory … the third function consists of staging situations that will compromise us … [to] turn the whole nation into a single organization of informers" (163).

"This is one thing in which the communists were pretty good: to feel freedom in anything," translator Ladislav Šenkyřík recalls wryly (Toocheck 16). Like the secret police kept tabs on the general population, the government also approved so-called official literature for public consumption. However, an entire parallel culture presented itself, which has come to be known as *samizdat*: unofficial, self-published literature. Government censorship of literature had very little in terms of legal justification, but this did not stop the application of bans and the withdrawal of books from libraries. Writers like Vaculík and Havel, therefore, took it upon themselves to create their own samizdat publishing houses. For the most part, however, "acts of courage after 1968 were in the minority and most people reluctantly conformed and tried to survive," recalls Jan Kavan, who was the Czech foreign minister in the mid-nineties (Tait,

"Prague 1968"). These twenty years, then, are portrayed as both a time of terrible oppression and a time of creative innovation that flourished under pressure.

By the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev had come into power in Russia. The Kremlin now portrayed itself as one of the most daring innovators in the communist world, a stark reversal of its sixties-era policies. Indeed, in the sixties, the Kremlin had been overly sensitive to reformist influences from abroad because of its reluctance to address Russia's own growing problems. It had become clear to many Moscow politicians that the Warsaw Pact Invasion had been launched to rescue anti-reformers frightened of change (Svec 983). In the late eighties, however, Gorbachev spoke of "new thinking" in public policy, flexibility, and the possibility that Soviet troops would soon leave Czechoslovakia. He had come to power during a Kremlin power struggle, leading Russia to neglect Eastern Europe, and he realized that he had to take action to mend and make flexible eastern-western relations. He wanted Eastern Europe under stable control and for it to be an economic and political asset to the Soviet Union, meaning that he had to get national politicians on his side and help their governments perform better (993). It was in this context that his policy of *perestroika*, intended to ensure the growth of the economy and democratize the Soviet Union, began to echo the promises of the Prague Spring (981). "We thought we had been strangling the Prague Spring, but we were actually strangling ourselves," he recognized in 1989 (Rupnik 440). In the Spring, reformers were willing to subordinate personal interests to common interests in order to address issues that were still extant twenty years later. Eighties-era reformers found themselves less confident because the Czechoslovak economy had deteriorated significantly. They also knew that any meaningful reforms would mean the weakening power of parties, for the reforms had to allow for broader representation and

accountability (Svec 1000). Like *The Guardian* editorial predicted in 1968, the Soviet Union tried "to raise the standard of living of its people and educate them, at the same time as it makes them conform. Education and prosperity are the enemies of conformism, and sooner or later conformism will be defeated."

In November 1989, the Velvet Revolution, a nonviolent shrugging off of Soviet control, occurred, and Alexander Dubček was elected speaker of the Federal Assembly. Vaclav Havel was elected President of Czechoslovakia, and after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Czech Republic. In December of 1989, the governments of the countries who had provided troops for the Warsaw Pact Invasion released a statement of apology that condemned their previous "interference." "These unlawful actions had long-term negative consequences. History has confirmed how important it is … to adhere strictly to the principles of sovereignty, independence, and non-interference" in international relations, they wrote (Navrátil 576). The Soviet Government released a similar, though much more defensive, statement. Though their statement calls the Invasion "unjustified," it also makes clear the government's beliefs that any preexisting problems were by no means the fault of Russia. "In 1968 the then-Soviet leadership sided with one of the parties in an internal dispute in Czechoslovakia that stemmed from festering problems," the statement reads. "At the time, this unbalanced, deficient approach and this interference in the affairs of a friendly country were justified with respect to the tense confrontation between East and West" (576).

Throughout the nineties, the Czech Republic democratized. Havel stopped criticizing capitalism after 1989, and the country experienced the political and economic pangs that other western and capitalist nations did and continue to today (Hůlova). The wealth gap widened and

people became discontented. Still, there was no longer a third way between capitalism and socialism, only democracy, and through this stance, the revolutionaries tried to separate themselves from the illusions of socialist reform of the Prague Spring. “We have ushered in an era of great stupidity,” Ludvík Vaculík wrote in the late nineties about the reforms, “and democracy has made me a very poor democrat” (Vaculík).

In the 2000s and early 2010s, several films and television series were released that depicted events surrounding the Warsaw Pact Invasion. Veronika Pehe analyzed two examples—the musical movie *Rebelové* (*The Rebels*) and the show *Vyprávěj* (*Tell Me a Story*)—and found that both display a certain amount of nostalgia for the material aspects of the 1960s, a phenomenon known as *ostalgie*. However, both classify this nostalgia as retro, for by telling personal stories and avoiding politics, they establish contracts with the viewer that the communist regime was bad and capitalism is good (Pehe 245). Therefore, it is not the regime the media are nostalgic for, but rather the acts of resistance in which the characters engage. Small acts are brave, but only small acts are acceptable; the characters reject politics, and that is a good thing for their survival. Anything larger would invalidate the narrative of self-pity and victimhood inherent in the Invasion, recalling Kundera’s idea of a Czech destiny. Dreams of emigration and entrepreneurship are embodied by the characters, forcing viewers to reevaluate the past to justify the present and representing politics of when the movies and shows were made rather than the actual period they depict (246).

In 2018, the Czech Republic commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Prague Spring, and the celebrations were revealing of post-1989 politics. Jacques Rupnik has written that there is no need to revisit the Spring’s history but rather its ideas. After all, it revived the debate about

the country's exceptionalism, displayed a generation's revolt against the establishment, and inspired Gorbachev's future policies. It was the triumph of Czech culture over communism. Significantly, the Prague Spring, Rupnik concludes, "was the last Czech attempt to propose not a blueprint but a vision (deemed utopian or inconsistent afterwards) that transcended the country and concerned Europe as a whole. In contrast, 1989 was the first revolution not to propose a new social project. A revolution without violence and utopias, but also without a strong new idea" (440). This "vision" is not wholly compatible with today's ideals, and this is why the public focuses on the tragedy of the invasion rather than the hopes of the Spring. However, he warns: what if in imitating the west the Czech Republic has imitated a model in crisis (441)?

Writer Petra Hůlova is also of this mindset. Through development that has left many behind through economic inequality, people are "hungry for alternatives, disenchanted and fed up with political elites everywhere" (Hůlova). Old KSČ members are the new class of oligarchs, and those struggling are reluctant to protest because anything is better than it was in the 1980s. "The Prague Spring, with its tragic ending, was one of the few bright spots in European history, and yet we continue to be taught that the only real reason to be proud of ourselves is the Velvet Revolution of 1989," she laments. The Velvet Revolution is celebrated, she says, because it made the Czechoslovaks just like the Europeans and Americans, whom they had been taught to admire.

"'Beware Russia' is an insufficient lesson to take from the Prague Spring—a sort of ideological hijacking that still prevails as the most popular takeaway not only for Czechs, but for Central Europeans in general," Hůlova writes, but Czechs today remain wary of Russians. A poll taken in early 2018 found that a "resurgence of Brezhnev-era propaganda, stereotypes of the Soviet period," has led to nearly half of the Russian population being ignorant of what the

Warsaw Pact Invasion was. More than a third of the population believes that the Russians were correct to invade, although an additional forty-five percent declared themselves unsure. These results may be due in part to the 2015 documentary *Warsaw Pact: Declassified Pages*, which aired on Russian state television and justified the Invasion so aggressively that both the Czech and Slovak governments released statements condemning it. Propaganda has also encouraged nostalgia for the Soviet Union, as "the communist legacy is largely associated with the victory over Nazi Germany in the second world war and its superpower status" (Roth).

Such propaganda is not limited to Russia. The Czech Republic hosts the "sole viable communist party of the former eastern bloc," the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which many view as a direct continuation of the old KSČ. It is also suspected of being a tool of Putin's, placed carefully to meddle in domestic politics. The politics of the current prime minister and president do little to disprove these beliefs; the prime minister, Andrej Babiš, is believed to have been an agent for the Czechoslovak secret police, the StB, and the views of Miloš Zeman, the Czech president, are strongly pro-Russian. The KSČM supports Russian foreign policy, including their intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The current party leader, Vojtěch Filip, joined the party in the early 1980s and denies all responsibility for the Warsaw Pact Invasion, even stating that the descriptions of Russia's involvement in the Invasion are falsified (Tait, "Czech Communists").

Claims of falsification raise the question of truth. The motto of Czechoslovakia was *pravda vítězí*—truth prevails. Considering the motto, Heda Kovály asked herself, "Does it? Truth alone does not prevail. When it clashes with power, truth often loses. It prevails only when people are strong enough to defend it" (182). A political doctrine like the USSR's communism,

convinced that their way is the only way, "must necessarily fail when confronted with … questions we are not expected to answer," as was discussed earlier in the context of art (Behr 18). Can a truth, then, apply in some situations and not others? The regime, after all, was "made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise," Kundera muses.

> They defended that road so valiantly that they were forced to execute many people. Later it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers.
>
> Then everyone took to shouting at the Communists: You're the ones responsible for our country's misfortunes (it had grown poor and desolate), for its loss of independence (it had fallen into the hands of the Russians), for its judicial murders!
>
> And the accused responded: We didn't know! We were deceived! We were true believers! Deep in our hearts we are innocent!
>
> In the end, the dispute narrowed down to a single question: Did they really not know or were they merely making believe? (176)

The Soviet government's apology statement of 1989 even concluded that the Invasion "in light of all facts known now was mistaken" (Navrátil 576). Did not knowing preclude them from guilt? As Kundera asks: "Is a fool on the throne relieved of all responsibility merely because he is a fool?" (177). After the Warsaw Pact Invasion, which she described as a "hideous truth," Kováły considered reluctantly, "maybe truth in its own oblique, unpredictable way had prevailed after all" (191). Who is to say what truth is, especially when intent and impact misalign so tragically? Before the Invasion, Ludvík Vaculík wrote in the "Two Thousand Words," "Let us not foster the illusion that it is the power of truth which now makes such ideas victorious … Truth,

then, is not prevailing. Truth is merely what remains when everything else has been frittered away" (Navrátil 179). It cannot be ignored, then, that the KSČ committed countless crimes in its pursuit of truth. Their cries of "'I didn't know! I was a believer!' [lie] at the very root of [their] irreparable guilt" (Kundera 177). The position of the regime can therefore be summed up as "on the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth" (Kundera 63).

Is there a single truth, then, about the importance of the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion? Kundera would likely say no. After all, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is about—as the title suggests—whether life is heavy or light. The novel argues that life is linear, meaning that events happen once and only once and therefore have little meaning, making life light. But people want their lives to have meaning and therefore attribute weight to their actions. They attribute meaning to the coincidences that make up life. How people interpret this meaning and weight is up to them; they create their own truths.

The novel presents the staggering end of the Prague Spring and its consequences of Normalization as a tragedy. Representations have changed over time given the political and economic contexts of the day, and there has not been a singular way in which the Spring and the Invasion have been represented. Instead, they have been presented as a time of juxtapositions: of optimism built up and torn down, of freedom and of fear—even of lightness and of weight. The use of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as a lens for these events displays the power of literature for analyzing historical events. As the novel concludes, there is no one truth about anything, including the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion, but both events are important for a consideration of human nature and the potentialities of politics and power.

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