



Prague: 1989

30 years of
freedom.
Places, Events,
Histories.

prague.eu/1989



Prague:emotion

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Cover photo: Velvet Revolution on Wenceslas Square, 1989;
© ČTK / AP / Peter Dejong

Dreams of freedom and democracy, fulfilled

This is what 1989 meant for several generations of Czechs and Slovaks. It was a time of political upsets, but best known for the 'post-November' Velvet Revolution. This is where the real road to the re-democratization of Czechoslovak society began. 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of events that fundamentally transformed the life of everyone living in the former Czechoslovakia; an opportunity to reflect. It had all begun a lot earlier.



Czechoslovakia behind the Iron Curtain

In a world polarized after WWII by the Soviet-American Cold War, Czechoslovakia found itself behind the Iron Curtain. Its further development was for decades steered by the might of the Soviet Union. The inter-war Democratic Republic period was supposedly to be forgotten forever.

It was only the Sixties, and especially the events of 1968, known as the **Prague Spring**, that showed the depth of freedom-loving feeling in society. But the period of 'socialism with a human face' was not given a second chance. The **occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces, headed by the Soviet Army in August 1968**, ended the aspirations for the more liberal approach by the domestic Communist Party then led by **Alexander Dubček**. The subsequent 'Normalization', as the process of returning to pro-Soviet obedience came to be called, was nothing more than the reaffirmation of long-standing practices, this time under the baton of Leonid Brezhnev.

Charter 77

Although the official regime tightened its reins of power, a group of pro-democracy activists was set to oppose it, in the spirit of the 1975 international Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in Helsinki. Under the name **'Charter 77', an informal citizens' initiative was launched**, criticizing the state apparatus for not respecting human rights and freedoms. At its head stood, among others, a playwright, **Václav Havel** – a man who was later to stand at the helm of major social changes.

Perestroika

After 1986 it seemed better times were ahead, thanks to **Mikhail S. Gorbachev**. The **glasnost – openness** initiative he brought laid the ground for partial political relaxation in the Soviet domain and on the international stage. The Soviet Union no longer dictated its allies' actions as vehemently as before. To great surprise, Gorbachev also refused to interfere in the internal problems faced by Communist leaders in the Eastern Bloc, and no longer considered military support for these regimes to be an option.

Palach's Week

When at the beginning of 1989 Czech society diffidently commemorated the 20th anniversary of the self-immolation protest by student **Jan Palach**, few thought possible the kind of changes that had already started in some other countries. Only a few dozen Czech dissidents had the courage to oppose established power structures and just a few hundred like-minded people came to support them on Wenceslas Square. At the time, the forces of repression were still being deployed to quell any attempts at social, cultural and, ultimately, political transformation.



photo: © ČTK / Michal Doležal

The Summer of 1989

Prague witnessed quite a heated summer during the holidays and in September of 1989, when at the Embassy of the German Federal Republic in Lesser Town crowds of Eastern Germans (the inhabitants of the then GDR) began to gather, refusing to return home and deciding to take a fundamental step – to live in a free and unfettered world. Hundreds of Trabant cars with East German license plates blocked the Lesser Town streets, and the seat of the West German Embassy, Lobkowitz Palace, was straining at the seams. The protagonists of this unprecedented event finally managed to achieve their aims with the support of **Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the Federal foreign minister**. Their success was another signal for the Czechs that the old order was collapsing, slowly but surely.



Trabant car
photo: © ČTK / imago stock&people

The fall of the Berlin Wall

The international situation in Europe and the (9 November 1989) fall of the hated wall which had divided Berlin, Germany and Europe, brought fresh hope to Czechoslovakia. **The most notorious symbol of the Cold War** was in ruins, but the Czechs and Slovaks had to wait a while longer with their struggle for freedom.

Saint Agnes of Bohemia

There was another major milestone in 1989. After several centuries of effort and many setbacks, the faithful finally saw the canonization by Pope John Paul II of Agnes of Bohemia, daughter of the Bohemian King Přemysl Otakar I, whereby the Pope emphatically supported the Archbishop of Prague, Cardinal František Tomášek in his programme called 'The decade of the nation's spiritual revival', aimed at Czech (not only Catholic) society. **The Canonization of St Agnes of Bohemia on 12 November 1989**, opened the door to a free Europe for the Czechs.

Student protest

There was supposed to be just a small student manifestation and a slightly provocative remembrance of events that took place fifty years earlier. In 1939, under the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Czech students had decided to demonstrate in opposition to Nazism. Several were injured by security forces and the medic **Jan Opletal** lost his life. His funeral then became a focal point for national protest and prompted the closure of Czech universities. **That was why on 17 November 1989**, a student procession set off from Albertov to remind of the ever-present desire for freedom, for people of all generations and all time.

17th November

The consequences were inevitable. The college-students' initiative, joined by many Prague residents, did not stop at taking a retrospective view, and did not end at Vyšehrad, as originally planned. The students wanted to express their views on current affairs, probably best characterized by one of them, who said: *'We don't just want to reminisce with piety, we have to think of the here-and-now and even more so about the future.'* Yet the students were not looking for confrontation. On the contrary, the flowers the participants bore in their hands symbolized the peaceable nature of the whole event.



photo: © ČTK / Pavel Hroch

Nevertheless, the demonstration, under close surveillance by **State Security forces** did not remain peaceful. In the narrowest part of Národní street, where the procession was deliberately herded, the Rapid Response Regiment of the 'Public Safety' police force was preparing to come down hard on the college students, jointly with other police units. The brutality with which the students were attacked shocked the general public and became the proverbial last drop that made the cup of restraint overflow.

The Velvet Revolution

What ensued was an avalanche, a huge welling-up of the stream of emotions suppressed and concealed over the years. Day after day, thousands of people gathered in Wenceslas Square to express their desire to return to democracy. Every evening after work, people would come to gather under the balcony of the Melantrich building on Wenceslas Square to listen to the topical sentiments of Václav Havel or the recollections of Alexander Dubček, the beautifully sung iconic 'Prayer to Marta' by Marta Kubišová or to the singer-song-writer Karel Kryl, who had been banned for years.



photo: © Profimedia

The crowds grew, swelled by workers from Prague industrial plants, and a strike was joined by actors who spent time on theatre stages discussing current events with their audiences.

The **Civic Forum** grouping was established – a civic platform of broad opinion, with one goal – to start up a dialogue with the Communist powers-that-be. Yet those days were full of tension and uncertainty whether there was to be some intervention by the People's Militia, the security forces, or even the army.



Alexander Dubček and Václav Havel, embrace as Communism collapses.
photo: © Profimedia

And then it finally snapped. The rejection by the then 'One Party Government' brought **eight hundred thousand people** out on Letná plain on 25 November 1989. This was too much public pressure even for the Communists, who could no longer claim the support of the working class. They capitulated and in the following month gave

up many of their positions. Although it was evident that the transformation of society would be long, painful and complicated, the first step had been taken. **On 29 December 1989, the dissident Václav Havel was elected President of Czechoslovakia.**



Václav Havel, Greeting the public, 1992
photo: © Tomki Němec/400ASA



Exhibitions

Carnations and Velvet / Art and Revolution in Portugal and Czechoslovakia 1968–1974–1989

 to 29 September  Municipal Library (2nd floor), Mariánské náměstí 1, Prague 1 – Old Town  ghmp.cz

Surprising details, parallels and paradoxes of ground-breaking events in Portugal and Czechoslovakia for you to experience at the first showcase event of Portuguese visual arts in Bohemia, in dialogue with Czechoslovak artists of that time. A presentation of artists' works that challenged totalitarian regimes and had a profound influence on shaping contemporary art in both countries. These include notable figures like Olbram Zoubek, Adriana Šimotová, Jiří Kolář, their Portuguese peers and many others.



A view of the exhibition: Tomáš Soucek

1989: The Fall of the Iron Curtain

 to 30 November  Prague Castle – Queen Anne Summer Palace, Mariánské hradby 1, Prague 1 – Hradčany  kulturanahrade.cz

In the Royal Summer Palace and adjacent garden you can see a number of photographs about 1989 in Central Europe. Some seventy Czech and Slovak photographers, together with several international ones, give first-hand accounts of thirty years ago, when the country's history began to diverge from the Socialist bloc, towards democracy and freedom. Among the artists featured in this unique exhibition are names like Jindřich Šreit, Viktor Kolář, Vladimír Birgus, Pavel Štecha, Herbert Slavík and others.

For the Truth...

 11 September – 27 October  The Lapidarium and Bethlehem Chapel courtyard tract, Betlémské náměstí. 4, Prague 1 – Old Town  gjf.cz

This year marks 650 years since the birth of Master Jan Hus and 30 years since the Velvet Revolution. This exhibition uses visual art to depict the setting where Truth was the subject of discourse. Both Jan Hus and Václav Havel are almost a personification of the topic of Truth, but even now we can find others fighting 'for the Truth'. This collaborative project has brought together artists, architects, art historians, philosophers and political scientists.

November 1989 in Prague streets

 25 September 2019 – 26 April 2020  The City of Prague Museum, Na Poříčí 52, Prague 8 – Karlín  muzeumprahy.cz

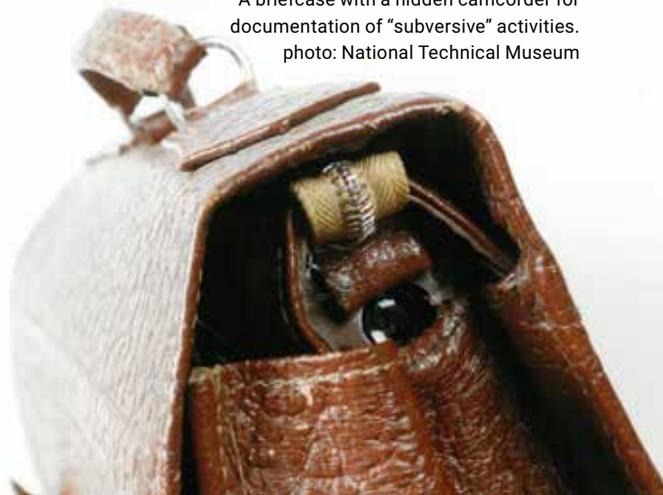
Through posters, leaflets, photographs and film footage, you can recall the events of November and December 1989 in Prague. Visitors will learn about the main events and their prime movers, those who were in the right place at the right time at this historical juncture and actively participated in the dismantling of the totalitarian political system.

Technology of Dictatorship. Technology in the service of (denying) freedom

 9 October 2019 – 23 March 2020  National Technical Museum, Kostelní 42, Prague 7 – Holešovice  ntm.cz

What were the technical means utilized by the machinery of totalitarian power in the former Czechoslovakia to suppress the fundamental freedoms and rights of individuals and groups of the populace? And what means did individuals and groups use to combat totalitarian power, to disseminate free thinking, or to flee the country? The major part of the exhibition covers the 1970s and 80s. Old-timers will be reminded of what life was like back then, while the younger generation will get a feel for totalitarian oppression.

A briefcase with a hidden camcorder for documentation of "subversive" activities.
photo: National Technical Museum



Jiří Sozanský: Amnesia

 15 October 2019 – 15 January 2020  Municipal House, náměstí Republiky 5, Prague 1 – Old Town  obecnidum.cz

Through the paintings, collages, drawings and sculptures by this Czech sculptor, painter and graphic artist Jiří Sozanský, this exhibition explores the fates of extraordinary figures, whose works and outlook stood up to Nazi or Communist totalitarian power – Josef Čapek, Milada Horáková, Jan Palach, Václav Havel and many others.

Communicating The Revolution 89

 16 October – 30 November  Cabin on Letná plain, Prague 7 – Letná  bubny.org

An exhibition and communication project on a site steeped in memory challenges us to better education about the media. It homes in on how a state coup was communicated, before the advent of the internet and social networks. The exhibit covers the whole range from samizdats to the fall of censorship during the TV broadcast from Letná on 25 November 1989. The extensive accompanying programme weighs up just how we have made use of the opportunity to cultivate public communication in a free world. Symbolizing the fragility of memory, the exhibition features previously unseen photos from the archive of Jaroslav Krejčí, whose negatives were stained by the flood to uncanny effect.

Velvet Revolution Moments

 1 – 30 November  Na Příkopě, Prague 1 – New Town  ctk.cz

ČTK – Czech News Agency has prepared a project with the significant participation of Czech citizens. The aim was to gather as many photos from among the public taken on the territory of the former Czechoslovakia, not only depicting the dramatic events of the autumn of 1989, but also those that preceded the November Revolution.

In Defiance

 8 November – 31 December  Jaroslav Fragner Gallery, Betlémské náměstí 5a, Prague 1 – Old Town  gjf.cz

Czech architecture between 1969 and 2019 and its major players, defiant against spiritual and commercial totalitarianism – a look back at 50 years of Czech architecture in terms of the moral fortitude of its protagonists. The main topics are the freedom of architectural expression, defend of public spaces, unofficial structure and exceptional achievement (exhibitions, etc.).

Saint Agnes and All the Saints, Pray for Us!

 12 November 2019 – 30 January 2020  Artinbox Gallery, Perlová 3, Prague 1 – Old Town  artinbox.cz

Tradition has it that good things shall come to pass in our lands only after the daughter of Přemysl Otakar I, also called Agnes of Bohemia, is beatified. The Velvet Revolution started a mere five days after that happened. The exhibition is devoted to the 30th anniversary of the beatification of Agnes of Bohemia (1211–1282).

Havel for President! The Year 1989 in Photography

 13 November 2019 – 16 February 2020  Trade Fair Palace (5th Floor), Dukelských hrdinů 47, Prague 7 – Holešovice  ngprague.cz

The aim of the exhibition is to critically evaluate the images taken during 1989 and find the best photographic footage to remind of the events at that time. Imagery from the anti-regime demonstrations will be supplemented by images of everyday life or those reflecting societal challenges and political changes.



photo: Karel Cudlín, Havel's election, 1989

From Hrádeček ('the little castle') to the Castle / Bring a Flower / 20 years in NATO

 14 – 24 November  Church of St Anne – Prague Crossroads Centre, Liliová (entrance from Zlatá St.), Prague 1 Old Town  prazsakrizovatka.cz

An exhibition of photos by Alan Pajer, the 'court photographer' of President Václav Havel, prepared in cooperation with the Dagmar and Václav Havel foundation VISION 97.



Music

Velvet Voices in the Wallenstein garden

 28 August from 17:00 h  Wallenstein Garden, Letenská 4, Prague 1 – Lesser Town  fok.cz

In prelude to the new season of the Prague Symphony Orchestra a reminder of the Velvet Revolution days, facilitated by prominent musicians. The free-access concert will be attended by, among others, Jaroslav Hutka, Michael Kocáb, Spirituál kvintet or Aneta Langerová reminding us that the events 30 years ago were indeed a matter for the younger generation.

PKF – Prague Philharmonia: Beethoven's 9th Symphony

📅 13 November from 20:00 h 📍 O2 universum, Českomoravská 17, Prague 9 – Libeň 📌 pkf.cz

At the opening concert of one of the largest multifunctional cultural centres, the O2 universum, you will hear Beethoven's 9th Symphony performed under the baton of chief conductor Emmanuel Villaume. Enhancing the programme are stars like Joyce El-Khoury with a pianissimo that critics have likened to the renowned Maria Callas, Stéphanie D'Oustrac or the Wagnerian tenor of his generation Simon O'Neill.



Simon O'Neill
photo: Albert Comper Photography

Student ensembles: Concert to commemorate Students' Day

📅 16 November from 19:30 h 📍 Rudolfinum – Dvořák's Hall, Alšovo náměstí 12, Prague 1 – Old Town 📌 ceskafilharmonie.cz

The Czech Philharmonic Orchestra will welcome Joachim Gauck, the former President of the Federal Republic of Germany, to give a speech on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the events of autumn 1989 that brought down totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Velvet 30

📅 16 November from 19:00 h 📍 Lucerna Palace – Grand Hall, Štěpánská 61, Prague 1 – New Town 📌 lucerna.cz
The Grand Hall of Lucerna Palace will, for one night only, become a hub of reminiscence and musical celebrations of the Velvet events. The concert will feature Jan Křížek, the band of Petr Malásek and Vojtěch Dyk and quite exceptionally Marta Kubišová, singing, among others, the unofficial anthem of the events of 1989 – the 'Prayer for Marta'.

Concert for the Future

📅 17 November from 16:30 h 📍 Wenceslas Square, Prague 1 – New Town 📌 festivalsvobody.cz

The culmination of events held as part of the Freedom Festival will be a concert programme in the upper part of Wenceslas Square. This packed programme full of concerts and speeches by figures of cultural and public life promises to bring a euphoric finale to the commemoration of events 30 years ago. More detailed information about the performers will be published during September.



photo: Petr Klapper

Velvet Minutes

📅 22 November from 19:30 h 📍 Municipal House – Smetana Hall, náměstí Republiky 5, Prague 1 – Old Town 📌 fok.cz

To celebrate the anniversary, the Prague Symphony Orchestra has prepared a somewhat unusual project in cooperation with its long-time member, the contrabassist Lukáš Verner, combining various musical genres. The orchestra will be accompanied by the Czech musical group minus123minut, whose major strength lies in improvised performances.



Miscellaneous

Agnes LIVE!

📅 to 8 September 📍 Convent of St Agnes of Bohemia, U Milosrdných 17, Prague 1 – Old Town 📌 ngprague.cz
For the third time, the grounds of the convent of St Agnes of Bohemia and its surroundings will come to life. This year's programme is also thematically linked to the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. Visitors can look forward to concerts, workshops, walkabouts, popular yoga classes as well as film screenings in the outdoor cinema. Entry to the convent complex, including its gardens

with their sculpture park and sightseeing circuit, is free all year round – as is the programme, scheduled to last until the beginning of September.

Bethlehem Cultural Night

 **10 September**  around **Betlémské náměstí, Prague 1 Old Town**  [facebook.com/Betlemskakulturninoc](https://www.facebook.com/Betlemskakulturninoc)

This year, the traditional multi-genre festival joins in the celebration with the motto For the Truth. Three dozen local institutions have prepared a rich open-air programme in otherwise inaccessible venues. You can look forward to the concerts, authors' readings, culinary experiences, film screenings, dancing and theatrical performances, guided tours and a programme for children.

Signal Festival

 **10 – 13 October**  **Prague – various venues**
 signalfestival.com

The streets and public spaces of Prague will for four evenings change into art-objects and spaces, as lit up by Czech and international lighting designers, capturing the different faces of the metropolis in unconventional ways. Illuminated, static, site-specific, 3D and interactive installations, projections and video-mappings will light up by the better known as well as the more sombre corners of Prague. This year's show is in the spirit of the Velvet Revolution.



photo: Signal 2018

Theatre Night

 **16 November**  **Prague theatres**  nocdivadel.cz

The third weekend night of November will belong to the Theatre Night. The seventh year on the subject of Theatre and Freedom will take place on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. Once again the theatres will offer offbeat programmes, such as nocturnal tours and team action events, theatre workshops, thematic discussions and lectures, exhibitions and performances, all for free or just a symbolic admission fee.

Korzo Národní 2019

 **17 November**  **Národní St., Prague 1 – New Town**
 dikyzemuzem.cz / festivalsvobody.cz

Národní street will once again be filled with art and come alive with street festivities to remind us of all those unafraid to face down the totalitarian regime. The programme promises dozens of concerts, theatrical performances, exhibitions, a street programme and an audio-visual show. Korzo Národní will surely be one of the biggest events of the whole anniversary.



photo: A happening on Národní Street

Velvet Procession after thirty years

 **17 November from 14:00 to 17:00 h**
 **Albertov – Národní St. – Wenceslas Square**
 dikyzemuzem.cz / festivalsvobody.cz

A live theatrical re-enactment of the student procession of 17th November. The slogan of the 1989 procession which summoned students to gather at Albertov was 'Take a flower with you!' This is no pious remembrance event, but a highly watchable occasion, whereby tens of thousands can relive the experience of coming together with a sense of belonging and civic pride.

Velvet Carnival

 **17 November**  **downtown Prague**
 sametoveposviceni.cz / festivalsvobody.cz

This satirical-carnival procession is inspired by the Basel Fasnacht and aims to cultivate a form of political protest through humour and hyperbole. With the help of outsize masks, allegorical floats and entertaining pamphlets, various civic initiatives will pass through the centre of the city, embodying current social themes, accompanied by live music.

 *Numerous other cultural events, happenings and inspirational information can be found on our thematic site*  prague.eu/1989.

Editorial deadline 14 June 2019. Programme content subject to change.

Prague sites where the events of 1989 took place

1 Albertov

It all started here on the university campus. What started as an innocent student manifestation, convened to mark 50 years since the Nazis closed Czech universities, soon became a demonstration calling for some political fresh air in the country. Student life is synonymous with freedom, but that had long been lacking for these college students. Under the slogan 'End One-Party Government', the participants set off, supported by Prague citizens. They just wanted to highlight the problems, to go through the city. But their call caught the Communist powers-that-be by surprise, and they were in no mood to parley.

1 The student march led from Albertov first to the Vyšehrad cemetery and from there was to head toward Karlovo náměstí. It was, however, redirected toward the waterfront and along it to Národní street. There was no other route, the bridge over the Vltava River and the embankment to the Old Town were cordoned off. State Security had good inside information about the march from its student infiltrators.

2 Národní Street

On November 17, 1989, the National street became the site of brutal intervention by the ruling Communist authorities, against defenceless college students. Their peaceful manifestation ended up in a face-off, whose dramatic developments, especially the brutality of special police divisions and arrests of the protesters brought revulsion and a welling-up of civic unrest. The memorial plaque at Kaňkův dům half way down Národní street is a constant reminder of how the Velvet Revolution began.



photo: Jadérko / Wikimedia Commons

3 Wenceslas Square

Every metropolis has a place where the nation's mood resounds. In Prague it is Wenceslas Square, where Czechs have expressed their stance many times in history. It was beneath the statue of St Wenceslas that the Czechoslovak Republic was declared in October

1918, and in 1939 demonstrations organized against the Nazi occupation, then against the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. Wenceslas Square also witnessed the self-immolation of Jan Palach on 16 January 1969. Subsequent events confirmed that his sacrifice was not in vain. It was the so-called Palach Week, organized by Charter 77 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the student's death that became the moment of Czech society's political awakening, in January 1989. Tens of thousands converged here after 17 November 1989 to express their desire for freedom. Václav Havel, Alexander Dubček and many others spoke out on those November days from the Melantrich palazzo balcony.



photo: © ČTK / Jarošlav Hejzlár

1 To recall Jan Palach, there is an unpretentious monument in the form of a cross nestled into the pavement outside the National Museum, evocative of a prone male figure. In addition to Jan Palach, attentive passers-by will find another name inscribed there: Jan Zajíc was another young student who followed Palach's example, choosing to die by setting fire to himself in the passageway of one of the buildings on Wenceslas Square.

4 Činoherní klub (The Drama Club)

November 1989 gave this small but very popular theatre a new role. After the events of 17 November, the majority of Prague theatres decided to launch a strike and provide a platform for discussions with people, bringing them up-to-date reports, allowing meetings with interesting personalities, Chartists, etc. The Drama Club not only took part, but also became the informal, improvised meeting place and base for the Civic Forum, an influential civil-political initiative that took up the role of chief coordinator in negotiations with the ruling Communists. It was from here, thanks to actors and



- 1 Albertov
- 2 Národní Street
- 3 Wenceslas Square
- 4 Činoherní klub
- 5 Letná plain
- 6 Municipal House
- 7 Prague Castle
- 8 Jan Palach Square
- 9 Bartolomějská Street
- 10 Šitkovská Water Tower
- 11 Václav Havel Square

their audiences, that news spread to the whole country and to the world. The Drama Club also became the true forum for the Velvet Revolution, its stage the setting for the most crucial dramas the reborn nation faced.

i *The Civic Forum was a grass-roots movement launched on 19 November 1989 at the Drama Club. It was conceived as non-partisan, a platform for all who demanded political change.*

5 Letná plain

The place that saw the biggest demonstration in November was none of the famous Prague squares, but spacious Letná plain. The prime demands declared from the tribune of the nearby Sparta Prague football stadium were for free elections, political pluralism, and the downfall of the Communist government. The tribune served as the podium for speakers, Václav Havel unmistakably among them. In overcast weather, Letná on 25 November brought together more than 800,000 people, and about half a million the following day. These two demonstrations, culminating in a general strike, became the outspoken expression of majority opinion.



photo: © Profimedia

6 Municipal House

The Municipal House has on multiple historical occasions been the setting of significant socio-political events. Without exaggeration, we might say that history has passed through its very portals, e.g. in 1918 when the Czechoslovak Republic began. In November 1989, the Municipal House hosted the first important negotiations of the Civic Forum representatives with the leadership of the outgoing Communist power. Also, on 14 December 1989 a concert for the Civic Forum in the presence of Václav Havel rang out in the Smetana Hall of the Municipal House. The piece was Symphony No. 9 by Ludwig van Beethoven, the 'Ode to Joy'...

i *On 26 November 1989, Václav Havel, as a representative of the Civic Forum, and Ladislav Adamec, the chairman of the Communist government, shook hands in one of the Municipal House lounges. It was also here that the first call came for the resignation of the then President and other leading representatives of the Communist Party.*

7 Prague Castle

When looking at Prague Castle, one cannot miss the impressive Cathedral of Sts Vitus, Wenceslas and Adalbert. It played its significant role with the beatification of St Agnes of Bohemia on 12 November 1989. This gave unprecedented impetus to the faithful, but wider society, too. The Prague Castle complex also played an important role during the major political transformations of 1989. The Vladislav Hall of the Old Royal Palace was the setting for the inauguration of President Václav Havel, toward the end of December 1989. Within just one month, this writer, playwright, dissident and politically pursued activist became Head of State. Thanks to President Václav Havel, the Castle underwent significant changes, with several architectural adaptations and opened up to the general public.

i *When Václav Havel came into Presidential office, there were many issues at Prague Castle that shocked him. These included, among others, the incompetence of the administration function and of many individuals, and not least the great separation between the President's office and other offices. When he complained to his friends, they gave him a lovely gift – a push scooter to help cover the distances.*

8 Jan Palach Square

One of Prague's most beautiful squares is lined with several monumental buildings, e.g. the famous Rudolfinum Concert Hall or the Museum of Decorative Arts. Another important building here is the Charles University's Faculty of Arts, whose frontage carries a remarkable commemorative plaque, the work of sculptor Olbram Zoubek. This is a death-mask casting of Jan Palach, who in January 1969 voluntarily decided to set fire to himself in protest against the occupation of Czechoslovakia, and to rouse Czech society out of its lethargy and moral quagmire. There is yet another monument on the square relating to the events of the Prague Spring and Palach's subsequent death, a pair of sculptures called in the original 'The House of the Suicide and The House of the Mother of the Suicide' by the American sculptor and architect of Czech origin, John Hejduk.



Sculptural composition of the Son's and Mother's Houses

9 Bartolomějská Street

This seemingly quiet Old Town Street belies a grim past. It was here that the interrogation rooms of the notorious State Security forces were located. Especially during the 1950s, this was the site of brutal questioning of those out of favour with the regime, and even during the 'Normalization' of the 1970s noted for ruthless practices and incarceration of dissidents or 'politically unreliable elements'. Among those who felt the harsh hands of oppression here were Václav Havel or Jiří Dientsbier, as well as Jan Patočka and many other signatories of Charter 77.

10 Štítovská Water Tower

Standing on the Vltava riverbanks are several interesting towers, with one thing in common. They were water towers, used to distribute water to Prague's historical towns. The Štítovská Tower has, however, made a name for itself in the public mind in an unusual way. In the 1970s, when Communist power dominated events throughout society, State Security built a surveillance station in the tower, from which it kept an eye and ear out over its broad surroundings. Chief among places of interest was the house standing across the street from the waterfront, in one of whose apartments lived a dissident, one Václav Havel. It was only after the Velvet Revolution that this surveillance post was shown to have been there.

i *Members of the infamous State Security did not rely on keeping watch on Václav Havel from the Štítovská Tower alone. They parked a caravan outside his house, too, under the pretext it served pavement repair workers.*

11 Václav Havel Square (Piazetta of the National Theatre)

The space between the original and new building of the National Theatre was created as part of the 'New Stage' construction project. Bringing a focus to the piazzetta is an installation by the sculptor Kurt Gebauer in the form of a 160 cm large granite heart on which people are invited to write messages. The space is used for cultural and social events.



photo: © ČTK / Michaela Říhová

Key figures and their stories

Václav Havel

* 1936 – Prague

† 2011 – Hrádeček (Vlčice)

The figure of dissident, politician, playwright and President Václav Havel is well known around the world today. He entered Czech history books during the Prague Spring of 1968, but most notably became the **leading representative of Charter 77** and the **November events of 1989**.



photo: © Profimedia

The last Czechoslovak and first Czech President Václav Havel was born in October 1936 into a major Prague business and intellectual family. Together with his brother, he grew up in a loving, inspiring and very active family setting.

After February 1948, when the Communists came to power, this businessman's son was not allowed to study, but after various difficulties eventually managed to graduate from secondary school in 1954 by taking a course of evening classes at the Academic Grammar School. The humanities subjects he subsequently opted for at the Charles University were denied him due to his incompatible cadre profile. He had to wait many years to continue his studies. By that time, he had progressed through his novice literary work and a critical speech at a conference of novice writers in 1956 at Dobříšš château. He carried on writing and exploring the world of literature. He had the opportunity personally to make the acquaintance of Jaroslav Seifert, Vladimír Holan and Jiří Kolář. Each of these meetings was one more piece of the mosaic toward Václav Havel becoming a writer.

After returning from compulsory military service in 1959 he fell under the spell of where he found himself; he started work as a stage technician, but during the culturally relaxed Sixties became a playwright and later assistant director. In parallel with his job he studied dramaturgy at the Academy of Performing Arts. In 1963, the 'Theatre on the Railing' put on his play called **'The Garden**

Party and three years later he published his first book, *Protocols*. Moreover, in 1964 he married Olga Špíchalová, who was to become his mainstay in life.

The invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops on **21 August 1968** brought the end of the political Prague Spring and the beginning of harsh reality for Václav Havel. From his position of a 'freelancer' or labourer in the Trutnov brewery, he maintained his independence, and through several open letters addressed to the leading Communist rulers, he sought to draw attention to the need for respect human rights, as well as to release political prisoners in Czechoslovakia.

The key event was the drafting of Charter 77. This essentially grassroots initiative criticising on the one hand the ruling party's imposition of power and on the other invoking the declarations of the Helsinki International Conference upholding human rights became a palpable problem for the Communist regime. Václav Havel, as the **co-author and spokesperson for Charter 77** represented the initiative outward, and punitive measures from officialdom were not far behind. In 1979 Václav Havel was **sentenced to four and a half years unconditionally for Sedition** and after his release came under constant surveillance by State Security.

Neither the persecution nor permanent pressure exerted on Václav Havel during the 1980s quelled his political and literary engagement. Thanks to significant support from abroad, staging the plays he wrote during the Normalization e.g. **Mountain Hotel, Largo Desolato** or **Temptation**, Havel became the leading representative of the Chartists and of Czech dissent abroad. He helped greatly to spread Samizdat publications, to disseminate information about the anti-communist opposition in the former Czechoslovakia, and to facilitate forbidden contacts.

And then came **1989**. In January, Václav Havel was, naturally enough, involved with Palach Week, which meant another jail term. Yet the subsequent European events, such as the collapse of the pro-Soviet bloc, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Prague's 17th November, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the rise of the Civic Forum paved the way for political negotiations that brought Václav Havel into a completely new role – **on 29 December 1989 he became President of the Republic**. In this capacity and during very complicated changes and processes of democracy building, Václav Havel carried on for nearly thirteen years.

Alexander Dubček

* 1921 – Uhrovec

† 1992 – Prague

The name Alexander Dubček is undoubtedly known in many European countries. It is most often associated with the **Prague Spring of 1968**, an attempt to bring reform from within the Communist movement, known under the slogan 'Socialism with a human face'.

Alexander Dubček came from a small village in north-western Slovakia from a left-leaning family. He spent his childhood and adolescence in the Soviet Union, brought there by his family's efforts to participate in the construction of Soviet socialism. The young Alexander came back to Slovakia only in 1938, training as a machinist and locksmith and at a time of incipient war joined the then illegal Communist Party. Under the umbrella of the Slovak pro-Fascist state he worked in heavy engineering and during the Slovak National Uprising participated in anti-Nazi resistance.



Post-war events took him into a professional political career. He graduated at the Communist Party University and given his excellent command of Russian, indeed his second mother tongue, he was chosen to study political science in Moscow. His studies spanned 1955–1958. This was followed by a steady stream of successes and promotions, first to head up the Communist leadership of Bratislava, then to the Central Committee and finally to the position of the **First Secretary of the Slovak Communists**.

At the beginning of 1968, the situation in Czechoslovakia grew considerably more acute. The reform wing of the ruling Communist Party was gaining influence, and Dubček seemed an ideal compromise candidate between the conservatives on the one hand and the reformists on the other. That was indeed how Leonid Brezhnev saw it. At the beginning of January 1968, Alexander Dubček reached the pinnacle of his political career and the social revival began. But the man who wanted to keep the Party liberalization going did not have an easy time of it. He faced not only criticism of prevailing circumstances but, thanks to greater press freedom, calls for more and more democratization of society. The action-points programme announced in April 1968 was supposed to accelerate the planned reforms, but went beyond the expectations of both conservatives and the Soviet leadership, who declared them counter-revolutionary. A final warning came in the form of bilateral Czechoslovak-Soviet talks, after which Brezhnev made his definitive decision.

Fears about the weakening of the pro-Soviet block led to a military solution and so on **21 August 1968 the troops of the Warsaw Pact entered Prague at Brezhnev's behest**. Dubček's role was brought into question and he was progressively compromised until his eventual removal from the Party leadership and other functions. During the Normalization period, he was under constant surveillance and in political terms earmarked for complete oblivion, to disappear from the country's collective consciousness.

November 1989 marked his triumphant comeback. He subsequently became chairman of the Federal Assembly, but many considered this a temporary solution. They foresaw him in the role of Slovak President. However, this was not to be. Alexander Dubček died before Czechoslovakia split up, as a result of a serious chauffeured car accident in November 1992.

Jan Patočka

* 1907 – Turnov

† 1977 – Prague

'I cannot, in fact, say what drew me to philosophy; indeed, I took it to be something quite different than it really is, something altogether breath-taking with the power of the imagination and of the spirit...

Like other young people, I found philosophy in the early days to be a kind of spiritual centre, standing somewhere between art, science, and perhaps the religious sphere...

These are the words of the greatest modern-day Czech philosopher Professor Jan Patočka, a man who was a leading scientist and no less a leading citizen at a time when the Communist regime did not allow freedom of thought or decision-making and thinking for oneself.

Jan Patočka studied philosophy at Charles University, but at the same time, as he promised his father, he also studied the Romance and Slavic languages. His father had expressed the fear that studying philosophy promised no future for a young man. While studying



photo: © Oldřich Škácha / Knihovna Václava Havla

in Paris and later in Freiburg, Germany, Jan Patočka began to devote himself to **phenomenology**. So as not to succumb to Czech provincialism, he kept in touch with many colleagues around the world and founded the Cercle Philosophique de Prague – the Prague philosophical circle. He also published a great deal and worked at the Faculty of Arts.

At the time of the Nazi occupation, after the closure of Czech universities, he became a secondary school teacher. He returned to the University after World War II, but not for long, because **after February 1948, he was once again not able freely to pursue his professional activities**. He worked in the Masaryk Institute and in the Pedagogical Institute of the Academy of Sciences, but his work was mostly published in samizdat. He regarded philosophy as a living spiritual activity rooted in Czech tradition, but not one to overlook the prevailing issues of the time. Because he could no longer act as a lecturer, in the 1970s he took part in the so-called 'apartment seminars'.

At a time when the civic opposition to Communist injustice was beginning to take shape, he **participated not only in the drafting of Charter 77**, but also became its spiritual father and spokesman. He considered respect for human rights and morally upright development of the citizenry as something absolutely necessary.

Thanks to his authority and his contacts abroad, he added much stature to Charter 77, heedless of personal setbacks. Indeed, Jan Patočka's civic engagement led to his being hounded and persecuted. He died as a result of being subjected to eleven solid hours of interrogation in March 1977.

Karel Kryl

* 1944 – Kroměříž

† 1994 – Munich

*'Upon the stately ensign, a guillotine depiction
upon the barbed wire fence, the stench of putrefaction,
ravens flock nesting o'er the land, the Hangman rules with an iron hand.*

*A truly dreadful land, they had you looking on
as they had writing banned, as they gagged signs of song
and not quite satisfied, they made the children pray,
to suit his every whim, His Majesty Head-Cut'*

The harsh words of the song 'His Majesty Head-Cut' evoke the atmosphere in which Karel Kryl spent his youth in the fifties and sixties. His protest songs perfectly captured the demarches and disillusion of the time.

Karel Kryl was born in 1944 into a printers' family, which lost their livelihood and roof over their heads after February 1948 due to nationalisation. He studied ceramics and graduated but found poetry and music closer to his heart than pottery. He started **writing**

and touring. His uncommonly mature delivery, poetic lyrics full of allusions, historical contexts and current problems and his great musical talent attracted professional interest, but the wider public most of all. One of the most popular songs was **'Little brother, close the gate'** as the songwriter's response to the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops, as also in his song called 'Brothers'.

Karel Kryl managed to get his first record released in Czechoslovakia just a few months after the August occupation, but his other songs were no longer tolerated in Czechoslovakia, neither published nor played. But they were spreading in secret with incredible verve. After many of his concerts were banned in the autumn of 1969, Kryl decided to emigrate. He became **a singer in exile and journalist with Radio Free Europe.** Just a few kilometres across the border, in the free world beyond the Iron Curtain, in Munich, Germany, he spent his next twenty years.

Karel Kryl no doubt found this period heavy going. His songs and poetry were only meaningful to his Czech followers. Fortunately, he was also able to do concert tours for émigré Czechs in Europe, the USA, and Australia. He wanted to live free, but missed the immediacy and audience reaction of his fans at home, where his songs circulated in samizdat with clandestine copies of the records he released throughout the 1980s. His attachment to his homeland is borne out by the fact **he never renounced his Czechoslovak citizenship.**

At the end of November 1989, Karel Kryl was finally able to return home, where thousands of people were awaiting his performances, joining him in song. Evidently, many of his lyrics had taken root in popular culture. He continued to keep a watchful eye on the changes in society after November 1989, very critically commenting on the policies he found wanting. **Yet he considered the Velvet Revolution to be the best period of his life.**



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