Prague's Underground Culture: A Catalyst for the 1989 Velvet Revolution

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The influential nature of art is undeniable – but is it enough to spark a revolution? My analysis of the Czech underground culture will reveal how influential art was for the 1989 Velvet Revolution in former Czechoslovakia. I will identify parallels between the Socratic Intellectualism, organization, and historical context that influenced the formation of Prague’s counter cultural movement through the late sixties to the late eighties, and how the movement became a catalyst for the subsequent revolution.

Czechoslovak Republic became an independent state on October 28th in 1918, following World War I, after its separation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During a period of twenty years following its independence, Czechoslovakia flourished in industry and economy – securing a spot as one of the top ten developed countries in the world (Czech Embassy). This period of prosperity, simmered down as Nazi Germany became vocal about its plans for expansion and came to a firm halt following the Munich Agreement - a settlement that permitted Nazi Germany the annexation of Sudetenland, a strategically advantageous north-western region in Czechoslovakia. All major European powers were invited to draft this document at a conference in Munich – with the exception of the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia. The intent was to appease Germany and slow down its expansion, but it was ineffective. The remainder of Czechoslovakia was annexed by Germany in 1939, and shortly after, World War II commenced.

Following the World War II, Czechoslovakia was reunified, and placed in the Soviet sphere of influence in accordance with the Warsaw Pact. February of 1948 marked the Czechoslovak coup d’état, during which the Communist Party gained total control of the Czechoslovakian government and incited four decades of Communist rule in the country. However, in 1968 the party faced a strong push from the general public for reformation and democratization, known as The Prague Spring. Unfortunately, The Prague Spring was largely unsuccessful, and ended when Soviet tanks invaded Prague and the main proponent of the reforms - Alexander Dubček – was forcibly removed. Overtime, however, the Communist regime began to lose its influence, until it was overthrown in 1989 during the Velvet Revolution – a non-
violent transition of power sparked by student demonstrations in Prague that escalated to mass protests. The Velvet Divorce then preceded the Velvet Revolution in 1993, as a peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia into two independent states - the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The countries have continued to grow independently - the Czech Republic has transformed into a parliamentary democracy and market economy while Slovakia has made progressive changes and significant economic reforms.

These historical events were heavily influenced by the underlying presence of dissent in Prague’s underground culture - specifically the rock and roll band The Plastic People of the Universe, the manifesto demanding human rights, Charter 77, and Samizdat Literature. Historians dismiss the importance of these works, arguing the Velvet Revolution was the organic result of general political turmoil throughout the Soviet Bloc, “fomented by the loosening of Communism’s grip under Mikhail Gorbachev” (Bilefsky). Yet artist, like those involved in The Plastic People, Charter 77, played a special role and helped spark a subversive inclination in citizens.

One of the most influential factors in movement was a band known as The Plastic People of the Universe, often referred to as The Plastic People or Plastics, which was formed in 1968 was heavily influenced by Andy Warhol’s Velvet Underground (Sullivan). The band was coined after a Frank Zappa song by the same name, because of the band’s strong identification with its seditious lyrics (Sullivan). It is important to note that at its formation, the intent of the band was not political involvement. Saxophonist for the Plastic People, Vlatislav Brabenec explains, “… cultural actions, not political actions, were sufficient to make [us] subversive. The politicians made us political, by being offended by what we did and the music we played. I don't know how many musicians in modern times have been imprisoned because their music offended the authorities, but we are among them” (Vulliamy). The band, gained popularity and continued to grow until 1968. The failure of the Prague Spring resulted in a period referred to as “Normalization” within Czechoslovakia (Vulliamy). This event resulted in the active censorship of all forms of media, literature, art and music – including The Plastic People. Despite newly implemented regulations, the band continued to play in secret, until 1975, when the secret police arrested fans heading to an unauthorized festival (Vulliamy). The arrests were sparked by fear, according to Vlatislav Brabenec, "… they could not manage us. They could lock students out of school, but what could they do to us? The worst part was in ’77, the never-ending interrogations, the constant battering, …We would sometimes sit for two or three interrogations a day. They would carry on from three to 10 hours." The arrest of the Plastic People sparked the
creation of a manifesto written by Ivan Jirous entitled *A Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival*. The manifesto was heavily influenced by the nationalistic viewpoints of 19th century composer Antonin Dvorak, who believed that one of the primary purposes of art was to create disorder (Vulliamy).

In his manifesto, Jirous called forth on the deep seeded history of Socratic intellectualism in the Czech Republic. The operational definition of Socratic Intellectualism is, “a person’s belief that a given action ought to be done guarantees that the person will perform that action, barring any external impediments.” (Gould 265). In short, in the right environment and access to information, people will do what is right. In his book *The Czech Question*, Jaroslav Střítecký points to, “democracy as a necessary condition for the existence of the Czech nation…”, thus becoming a mainstay of Czech politics. However, unemployment in the 1930’s in Czechoslovakia led to a progressive reform of political philosophies (Welleck 624). When democracy was overshadowed by the bleakness of life in the Eastern Bloc, it was intellectualism and revolutionary ideas that rallied the nation to its freedom. Intellectualism became a source of counter-culture individualism, hope, and innovation. It was the artists who became the intellectuals, and took it upon themselves to be the speakers of uncensored truth. It is this that attitude that made the manifesto and the Plastic People so influential – they were the intellectuals that served as reminders to the people of a future that would be impossible to achieve under the communist regime. As the lead singer of the Plastic People, Paul Wilson noted, "What was significant was that the Plastic People of the Universe were the catalyst that brought these elements together. I'm not saying that there wouldn't have been a human rights movement in Czechoslovakia without the Plastics, but they became the first sort of 'cause celebre'." And as a country with a deep-rooted cultural history of independence and assertion, they became significant factors in the political shift.

After 1968 the political atmosphere became increasingly more oppressive. On March 16, 1976, the secret police raided the music underground and arrested many musicians including the Plastic People, claiming the “an organized disturbance of peace” as justification for the arrest (Bilefsky). The group was unsure what the public response to the injustice would be – assuming that their arrest would be dismissed as justified, but the Czech people rallied behind them and the underground culture. Their arrest also garnered the attention of samizdat writer, and later Czech President, Vaclav Havel, who, along with Jan Patocka, Jiri Hajek, and Anna Sabatova created Charter 77, a manifesto admonishing the regime for failing to live up to the Helsinki agreement and demanding the freedom of artists (Sabatova). Over 1,800 people, most
of who were then promptly arrested, beaten, and imprisoned, signed the charter. Anna
Sabatova described the unity of the movement, saying "Charter 77 … united writers and artists
with scientists and politicians, as well as laborers and clerks. … Seventeen-year-old dissidents
could rub shoulders with people who had fought against fascist Germany and who served time
in Stalinist labor camps. The original document also gave three people… the right to serve as
spokesmen for the movement and to represent it in its dealings with the state and other
organizations " Despite this extreme response to the Charter, it was never publically denounced,
because the Communist party did not want it to garner further attention. Instead, in order to
further admonish the Charter, it created the “Anti-Charter” in 1977, which was declared by the
Official Artist’s Union and read out on live television in the National Theatre in front of an
audience of prominent Czechoslovak artists (“Charter 77”). The document garnered over seven
thousand signatures from artists, however it should be noted that at the time many of the artists
who signed the document were unaware or coerced into its signing (“Charter 77”). The Anti-
Charter indicated a breach in the countries foundational belief in intellectualism - the affairs of
the country was clearly out of the hands of the people. It is important to note that both the
location of the signing of the Anti-Charter, and its live documentation would have been viewed
as extremely antagonistic, because National theater was, and continues to be, a symbol of
national identity. The blatant infringement on free expression was followed by a slow burning,
yet persistent challenging of the system from citizens, eventually culminating in nationwide
student protests 1989, gathering support, and growing to an unprecedented half a million
protestors – approximately seventy five percent of the country’s population (Lynch).

These events inaugurated by Charter 77 and the Plastic People can be best
summarized in the ideology presented by Vaclav Havel in his essay Power of the Powerless,
“Sometimes you have to act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can’t prove that it
will.” The concept is reiterated throughout Havel’s writing, and echo’s the anti-government
ideologies that were circulated in the underground publications known as Samizdat literature.
The word “samizdat” was coined by the Russian poet Nikolai Glazkov, meaning “self-published”,
and is a general term encompassing all censored texts that were distributed via underground
publications in the Soviet bloc (Zubok). While the texts themselves did not always have political
underpinning, they served as guides and inspiration for those who sought intellectual
independence from uniform censorship. Writers, like Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, and Ivan
Klima all gained extreme popularity in underground circles, and helped create a sense of
community in an otherwise seemingly divided country. The ideologies of these authors
resonated and guided the students who protested on November 16, 1989. Their actions let to
the revolution and proved that, as Havel wrote in *The Power of the Powerless*, “… the real question is whether the brighter future is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?” It is this underlying thought that influenced not just the students, but all dissidents – from the Plastic People to the drafters of Charter 77.

It is easy to view events like the Velvet Revolution as purely political, and removed from art, literature, film, and media, but there is an alternative. The ability to strike a universal chord, embrace harsh truths, and examine the human experience is tremendously powerful – powerful enough to influence an entire revolution. So in the words of the first Czech President, while the art may not be the cause of freedom itself, “When a truth is not given complete freedom – freedom is not complete.”
Works Cited


Inspired by Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground, and friends with Vaclav Havel, their incredible 40-year history is one in which music and politics are inseparable. Ed Vulliamy. Sat 5 Sep 2009 19.07 EDT First published on Sat 5 Sep 2009 19.07 EDT. And in Prague in 1968 and 1969, if you wanted to tell your own story, and play your own music, you became political, whether you intended it or not, because the authorities deemed you a threat to their "official" culture. Brabenec also deepened Jirous's interplay between culture and the political underground by arranging for the Plastics to release their first record â€œin Franceâ€œ based on lyrics by the outlawed writer Egon Bondy. During the years between 1977 and the Velvet Revolution, the pressure intensified, then eased. The occupation was provoked by the Prague Spring, the attempt by Czechoslovak reformers to build a human face for socialism. Barbara, how did the Prague Spring affect the life of the theatre practitioners? â€œWhen the invasion came, no one knew what was going to happen. It culminated in his imprisonment and the first of the trials, as well as the formation of what was called the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted. He was one of the seven or eight people who were put on trial and given a prison sentences for several years. So in 1979 he was sent to prison I think for about 4 years.â€œ And he was not alone.