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THE WRITER'S ROLE IN NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE: VÁCLAV HAVEL AND THE
POWER OF LIVING IN TRUTH

MARGARET GRACE EPPINGER
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Catherine Wanner
Professor of History, Anthropology, and Religious Studies
Thesis Supervisor

Cathleen Cahill
Associate Professor of History
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

In 1989, Eastern Europe experienced a series of revolutions that toppled communist governments that had exercised control over citizens' lives for decades. One of the most notable revolutions of this year was the Velvet Revolution, which took place in Czechoslovakia. Key to the revolution's success was Václav Havel, a former playwright who emerged as a political leader as a result of his writing. Havel went on to become the first president following the regime's collapse, and is still one of the most influential people in the country's history to date.

Following the transition of Havel from playwright to political dissident and leader, this thesis analyzes the role of writers in nonviolent revolutions. Havel's ability to effectively articulate his ideas gave him moral authority in a region where censorship was the norm and ultimately elevated him to a position of leadership. His role in Czechoslovak resistance has larger implications for writers and the significance of their part in revolutionary contexts.

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Introduction

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 stands out not only as a watershed moment in communist history, marking the end of the Soviet Union's control over Czechoslovakia, but also as an important example of nonviolent resistance. Resistance to communism in Czechoslovakia spurred student protests and influential written works as opposed to violent coups and military clashes. Even more unusual than its nonviolent nature was the prevalent use of the written word. This contrasts significantly with most of the revolutionary movements in Eastern Europe at the time, which emphasized other aspects of resistance over writing.

Over the years, resistance in Czechoslovakia mounted and found expression in an intellectual sphere with writers, artists, and thinkers taking center stage as the main force behind the opposition to the regime. Their demands were to reclaim public discourse, which had been dominated for the previous four decades by propaganda. As put eloquently by British historian Timothy Garton Ash, "Everything that had to do with the word, with the press, with television, was of the first importance to these crowds...cleaning up the linguistic environment was as vital as cleaning up the physical environment."¹ He applies this sentiment to all of the revolutionaries of 1989, but it is especially relevant in Czechoslovakia. The dissidents there founded their movement on exposing the hypocrisy of communist rhetoric by contrasting it with the reality in which they lived.

¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolutions of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (New York: Random House, 1990), 138.

Many of the ideas behind Czechoslovak resistance came from its leader, Václav Havel. Havel did not begin his career as a politician; rather, he gained fame as a dramatist. His plays initially received more attention than his essays.² As he began to engage in political commentary in the 1970s and 1980s, Havel's writing influenced a movement that would go on to nonviolently dismantle the totalitarian regime in his country. He also founded the Civic Forum, an organization designed to unify Czech dissidents, and he was later elected the first president of a democratic Czechoslovakia.

One reason that Havel obtained such status as a writer was that communist regimes in the Soviet Union governed out of fear for what writers could do. Total censorship of the press and of literature was common practice, making these political systems hostile towards writers and other potentially critical thinkers. Since these systems relied so heavily upon rhetoric and propaganda to promote legitimacy and obedience, anyone who effectively questioned that ideology—as writers, scholars, and artists often could—was considered a threat to power. Writers could disseminate ideas that prompted people to more closely examine the propaganda they were constantly exposed to. This fundamental fear of writers and their ability to challenge the legitimacy of communist rule gave them a certain kind of power and moral authority.

The respect for writers in Czechoslovakia provided Václav Havel with a platform from which to effectively resist the government. Havel evolved from a playwright to a president because he was able to clearly articulate ideas that undermined oppressive rhetoric. The intellectual nature of the Velvet Revolution—a movement founded by students and prominent thinkers around the ideals of free speech and civil discourse—lent further credibility to Havel's political writings and gave them more weight.

² Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, comp. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), ix.

Havel's role as a key figure in the Velvet Revolution and in Czechoslovakia's first post-communist government calls into question the role of the writer during moments of resistance. Does a writer have an obligation to resist oppression? Does a writer have the moral responsibility to utilize their platform to speak on behalf of those who do not speak for themselves? In addition, Havel's presidency illustrates the potential for a writer's role as a spokesperson for the truth to extend beyond a resistance movement and into politics, where words become action. In which other capacities can writers be useful following a revolution? Are they better suited to pursuing the craft of writing and inspiring others to resist?

To better understand the writers' role when confronting oppression, it is important to first define resistance. This thesis begins by examining definitions and methods of resistance, including historical arguments as to what constitutes a revolution. The first section also explores the differences between nonviolent and violent revolutions. It considers what these movements might look like, what motivates dissidents, and what their methods of resistance are. Finally, this section comparatively examines the larger historical context of Havel's day by contextualizing the Velvet Revolution within the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe. While these revolutions had similarities, each of them had a different unifying factor; the emphasis on intellectualism among Czech dissidents is what gave Havel an edge in becoming a leader. All of these factors taken together provide a definition of resistance applicable to Czechoslovakia to better determine how the writer fits into this model.

After defining resistance and analyzing the historical context, the thesis examines Havel's key writings, tracing the evolution of his thought from political opinion to moral philosophy. Havel's politicization began with the plays he wrote during the 1950s and 1960s, which served as a basis for his later more explicitly critical essays. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Havel

became a more active dissident and was known for openly criticizing the regime in his writing. Looking at both Havel's plays and his political essays gives a better sense of how he shaped his role as a writer and rose to such prominence. Besides his plays and essays, other primary sources analyzed in this section include Havel's interviews, speeches, and letters.

Milan Kundera, another Czech writer, is as an interesting counterpoint to Havel both in his biography and in his writing. As an active reform communist, Kundera frequently clashed with Havel in published essays. Kundera took a more Czech-centered approach to history than Havel, who preferred to explore universal themes of humanity. Over time, however, Kundera became disillusioned with the idea of reforming communism and went into exile in France. He later lost his Czech citizenship and further distanced himself from his homeland. His decision to leave Czechoslovakia illustrates another course of action for a writer during moments of resistance.

The collapse of the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia created a scenario in which the people who once resisted and criticized the regime were the ones who assumed power. Havel reflects on his post-revolution time in office by saying, "we are witnesses to a bizarre state of affairs: society has freed itself, true, but in some ways it behaves worse than when it was in chains."³ With this statement, Havel suggests that oppression led to a higher standard of morality among his fellow dissidents, while "freedom" resulted in people serving for self-interest as opposed to the common good. In its final part, this thesis considers whether or not Havel was able to successfully implement his vision—and expand the role of the writer as a moral voice—in post-communist society.

³ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, 2.

Havel's journey from playwright to president provides a rich context for understanding how and why the writer can be important in nonviolent resistance. Havel himself remarks in *Summer Meditations*, a series of reflections written eighteen months after being elected president, that "When the idea first came up that I should let my name stand for president of Czechoslovakia, it seemed like an absurd joke. All my life I had opposed the powers that be. I had never held political office, even for a moment."⁴ However, Havel then writes several paragraphs later, "When I think about [being elected president] today with a cool head, I find myself somewhat surprised that I was so surprised."⁵ Havel's written work, as the moral center and unifying force of the Czechoslovak resistance, foresaw his eventual leadership. A thorough delving into the case of Václav Havel—his works, his ideas, and his revolution—can help illuminate the responsibility of the writer in times of revolution.

⁴ Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), xv.

⁵ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, xv.

Chapter 1

What is Resistance?

Resistance, and How Best to Define It

Historians and political scientists have long attempted to define an abstract idea of ‘resistance’ and ‘revolution’ by giving it recognizable forms. By defining what “resistance” means and the forms it can take, the value of the writer becomes more apparent. This model for resistance can then act as a means to elucidate how Havel’s work as a writer and a leader are intertwined.

Crane Brinton’s 1938 *The Anatomy of a Revolution* outlines a very broad “pattern” that all revolutions appear to follow. Brinton developed a scientific approach to resistance by examining four different cases: the English Revolution in the 1640s, the American Revolution in 1770s, the French Revolution in the 1780s and 1790s, and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. These resistance movements were all by some means successful. Through his study of the four cases, Brinton determined that they have similar “life cycles,” which equates to a “fever cycle.”

First, Brinton found that each society experienced signs of discontent under their old regime followed by a “time when the full symptoms disclose themselves, and when we can say the fever of revolution has begun.” Then a period followed in which the most radical revolutionaries came to the forefront, and the country went into crisis mode. Lastly, he found the situation began to calm down, and the society was “in some respects the stronger for it; but they

by no means emerge entirely remade.”⁶ Although Brinton’s schematic for a revolution allows for a very introductory understanding of how to categorize a resistance movement, it does not take into account any other important historical factors, such as time period, geography, culture, and situational context.

Despite the obvious caveats when making such broad generalizations about resistance movements, historians and political scientists still try and establish ‘universal’ patterns, even in more recent scholarship. Robert H. Dix plays off the ideas of Samuel Huntington and asserts that there are two patterns of revolution: an “Eastern” and a “Western” revolution. In a so-called Western revolution, a weak government collapses as a result of a crisis, followed by a conflict between moderate revolutionaries and radical revolutionaries. Eastern revolutions, in contrast, take place when governments are in the midst of modernizing.⁷ In his article “Varieties of Revolutions,” Dix proposes that there is also a third revolutionary model characteristic of Latin America in the 1980s, which contains more “urban” elements. In contrast to the “Eastern” revolutions, these Latin American movements did not mobilize peasants but rather members of the middle class in the cities.⁸

These models fail to fit the movements that preceded the fall of communism in Eastern Europe as well as many others throughout history. The binary of “Eastern” and “Western” does not lend itself well to analyzing revolutions, as it lumps complex, multi-faceted movements, countries, and societies into two broad categories. While not quite as general as Brinton’s model, Dix’s theoretical model does not allow for instances where a revolution diverge from these patterns. Dix acknowledges the limitations of the “Eastern” and “Western” revolution model to

⁶ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of a Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938), 26.

⁷ Robert H. Dix, "The Varieties of Revolution," *Comparative Politics* 15, no. 3 (April 1983): 281, JSTOR.

⁸ Dix, "The Varieties," 282.

some degree, which are largely due to his reliance on geographical location as opposed to political, social, or economic criteria. These factors are all significant in terms of sparking a resistance movement.

The book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* by James Scott eschews categorizing revolutions altogether in favor of creating a framework for how power works to shape resistance. Scott writes that domination and resistance are closely related to one another and that “domination does not persist of its own momentum.”⁹ He argues that domination is shaped through outward, visible actions taken to establish power. These actions form what he terms the “public transcript,” which is the primary interaction between the dominant force and the oppressed.¹⁰ In the Soviet-controlled countries, propaganda and rituals made up the public transcript, and Scott draws upon the Soviet May Day parade as an example of this phenomenon.¹¹ The public transcript directly opposes the “hidden transcript,” which takes place “beyond direct observation by powerholders.”¹² These are actions that go against the dominant force in ways that they may not even be aware of. An example of something that would be a part of the hidden transcript would be networks of people in the Soviet Union that passed along unauthorized information to one another through informal channels. From Scott’s work, it is possible to conclude that resistance can form and grow in that hidden transcript until it becomes part of the public transcript as an act of outright opposition. Scott presents a much more nuanced look at how power dynamics work and at how revolutions form in terms of a relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 45, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁰ Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 3.

¹¹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 46.

¹² Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 4.

Although historians and political scientists might disagree on what constitutes a revolution and what forms resistance can take, most can agree that a revolution is an event that forces governmental and institutional changes.¹³ Revolutions also rely on mass participation; Goldstone accurately points out that revolutions cannot occur with just one person fighting for change, even if there is a central figure to lead the people. In addition, resistance aims, and often succeeds, at changing the structure of a country's governing system.

However, perspective further complicates matters in that how we view the act of resistance often shapes the movement itself. Goldstone argues that revolutions are often looked at in two different ways and broadly categorized as "heroic" or "chaotic." In the former, "downtrodden masses are raised up by leaders who guide them in overthrowing unjust rulers, enabling the people to gain their freedom and dignity," while in the latter, "revolutions are eruptions of popular anger that produce chaos...chasing unrealistic visions and their own glory, revolutionary leaders lay waste to civilized society and bring unwarranted death and destruction."¹⁴ Whether a revolution is seen as "heroic" or "chaotic" depends greatly on the vantage point of the viewer. In the case of Czechoslovakia, many citizens held Havel and his fellow dissidents in a heroic light as figures fighting for the values of a free society. In contrast, the communist government viewed their resistance as chaotic and a threat to both their power and their attempts to create a unified, stable communist state.

Goldstone himself concedes that this duality exists: "In reality, the history of revolution reveals both faces."¹⁵ Resistance is multi-faceted and not always black and white in nature, which is what makes it so difficult to define by broad categories. As a result, it is necessary to

¹³ Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

¹⁴ Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very*, 1-2.

¹⁵ Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very*, 2.

examine revolutions on a case-by-case basis, taking into account factors such as a country's political system, economic situation, and social structure. The revolutions of 1989 reflect the conditions of living under communism in Eastern Europe. Their emergence and the forms resistance took are inextricably connected to this experience.

Means of Resistance, Both Violent and Nonviolent

The means of resistance can sometimes be a more accurate way of assessing the nature of a particular revolution. One of the most important determinants of a revolution is the level of violence involved. Who is committing the acts of violence? In some cases, it is multiple parties engaged in a military conflict. In others, a revolutionary force might stage a coup d'état. In others still, the oppressors commit acts of violence against a group of people acting in a pacifistic and nonviolent manner. A revolution is nonviolent if there are no acts of violence committed on the side of the dissident or resisting force, even if the oppressors engage in such tactics.

Revolutions are distinct from uprisings. According to historian Siani-Davies, who writes on the Romanian Revolution of 1989, "revolutions are often presented as having an overall sense of purpose that is lacking in uprisings. Usually, this purposefulness is presented as a vision of the future that remains constant."¹⁶ On the other hand, uprisings are more prone to acts of violence to achieve the end goal precisely because there is a lack of unifying purpose. They will also, in turn, be less likely to achieve success in changing the governmental structure. In contrast, a revolution frequently has the opportunity to brand itself as violent or nonviolent.

¹⁶ Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 271.

Since most oppressive regimes censor or silence critics, dissidents must conduct their activities in subtle ways to avoid retaliation. Hidden forms of resistance can prevent retribution while effectively spreading information among groups of people. This type of resistance can take many forms. As Scott writes, “The undeclared ideological guerrilla war that wages in this political space requires that we enter the world of rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity.”¹⁷ Artistic and literary contributions to a resistance movement fall under this category; literature in particular often employs ambiguous devices, such as symbolism or hidden meanings, that can covertly criticize a regime. Using literary devices could be categorized as what Scott refers to as “disguising the message,” concealing criticism from the regime. Other tactics include “disguising the messenger” in order to prevent retaliation against a specific person or group.¹⁸

However, not all means of nonviolent resistance occur in hidden spaces. In the Velvet Revolution, and the other revolutions of 1989, nonviolence became the public signature of dissident activity that included nonviolent protest, strikes, demonstrations, and petitions. The role of the written word cannot be discounted either, as “political theory cannot be excused from dealing with dissident writings.”¹⁹ These revolutions were often sustained by the writing of dissidents, who were able to convey criticism and inspire people to take action.

Goldstone partially attributes the success of certain nonviolent revolutions, such as those in Eastern Europe, to their insistence that free elections are a necessity for a legitimate regime.²⁰ The goal of Poland’s Solidarity movement was to obtain freer elections. The movement

¹⁷ Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 4.

¹⁸ Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 139.

¹⁹ Popescu, *Political Action*, 22.

²⁰ Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very*, 105.

measured their success its winning elections in 1989 against the communist regime. Having a clear endgame in mind—in this case, free elections—might make a revolutionary force more inclined towards using peaceful methods of protest. By not engaging in violent tactics, the resisters establish a precedent for a more stable form of democracy after taking down an oppressive regime. Creating a basis for peaceful society even before an upheaval has occurred in benefits a country post-revolution. Establishing that nonviolent precedent can help ensure that the cycle of violence and oppression does not continue. It also provides a roadmap for countries to maintain stable democracies. This is why writers become so important in revolutions—they can articulate clear visions to motivate people to act.

The Dissidents of '89

The revolutions of 1989 formed under similar conditions and had a common political system to struggle against. They also each had their own rallying point or central figure to unify them, whether it was a specific person or a symbol of some kind. Finally, these revolutions largely utilized nonviolent means of resistance to move towards a common goal: the removal of a communist government and advancement toward democratically elected leaders.

Although the majority of the revolutions taking place in Eastern Europe shared these key characteristics, the nature of their dissident groups differed. The Solidarity movement in Poland rested on a workers' trade union and strikes were a common form of protest. Lech Wałęsa stood at the helm of the push for workers' rights and greater freedoms in Poland and became an important part of the eventual Round Table Discussions that would lead to freer elections in 1989. Wałęsa is an interesting figure in comparison to Havel in that he also entered government

service after the fall of communism. He was an electrician and mechanic, not a career politician, and, like Havel, he did not have a background in politics and came directly from his country's dissident movement.

Polish dissidents laid the groundwork for the revolutions that followed in Eastern Europe. According to Garton Ash, "the story of 1989 cannot be understood without reference to the largest and most sustained popular 'push' in the history of communist Eastern Europe, that of Solidarity since 1980."²¹ By obtaining freer elections, Solidarity paved the way for the other resistance movements to succeed by creating a domino effect that rippled throughout Eastern Europe. As put by Victor Sebestyen, "This is a story with a happy end... The people's will had triumphed over tyranny in a dizzying few months of almost entirely peaceful revolutions which changed the world."²² Through the workers' fight for freedom in Poland, other countries had an example to follow and were able to establish their own nonviolent resistance movements.

The Hungarian dissident movement also had a singular figure to rally behind. However, unlike Wałęsa in Poland and Havel in Czechoslovakia, Imre Nagy had been executed by the communist government and was not so much a leader as a martyr. Nagy's original burial place was a secret, as "the regime did not want it to become a place of pilgrimage or for Nagy to turn into a martyr."²³ Thirty-three years after his death, a public funeral held for him became the spark of a revolution. The Hungarian case shows once again that a key factor in these nonviolent revolutions was a moral authority for the public to rally behind. In this case, however, the moral center of the movement was not alive to actively influence dissidents, marking a difference with other Eastern European revolutions.

²¹ Ash, *The Magic Lantern*, 15.

²² Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), xviii.

²³ Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 293.

In East Germany, the Berlin Wall stood as a symbol of communist power. The Wall was at the city's "very centre. And it ran through every heart."²⁴ Instead of being comprised of a specific group of people, such as the workers of Poland, or centered on a particular figure like Havel, German dissidents were geographically defined by their isolation from West Germany. Their symbol of resistance was the Berlin Wall, and their goal was to break down this imposing barrier. The East German revolution also benefited the most heavily by the lessening of political control under Soviet President Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost policies.

Although the revolutions of 1989 had their differences, they all stemmed from similar experiences under Soviet control. They shared resentment over the conditions of living under communism in Eastern Europe, and this commonality is what makes them all part of a historical moment. Thus, the revolutions of 1989 were not separate resistance movements but rather a singular push for political change. However, they all had different dissident forces, so it is more fitting that these revolutions, while connected, be classified as separate events.

What is most intriguing about these revolutions is the fact that they all experienced violent means of suppression but responded nonviolently. Even though the governments engaged in violent, brutal tactics against their own citizens to suppress these movements, the dissidents were committed to resistance methods that included demonstrations, strikes, and of course, openly critical works of writing, such as political essays, charters, and petitions—to name a few.

The key to the nonviolent nature of the revolutions of 1989 lies in a gradual build up of dissatisfaction. This connects back to Brinton's theory of revolutions and his argument that the first stage of a revolution is growing signs of discontent among the people. In addition, the Soviet Union's hold on the region had been gradually slipping by the time the revolutions hit

²⁴ Ash, *The Magic Lantern*, 65.

their peak. According to Sebestyen, “No other empire in history had ever abandoned its dominions so quickly or so peacefully” and this was because the USSR was “exhausted, bankrupt, and painfully aware...that communism had failed. The USSR lost its will to run an empire.”²⁵ Popular discontent grew in these countries over the years, as “major acts of rebellion that would explode every few years when people would declare en masse that they had had enough...there was an undercurrent of resentment that seethed daily.”²⁶ Daily mistreatment of citizens created a deep-seated hatred for the region’s regimes and a desire for change. This feeling only grew stronger over time and eventually manifested itself in nonviolent resistance.

Romania was the only country to see violence on both sides. In December 1989, the country experienced a period of political turmoil and upheaval as a result of erupting revolutionary activity. A small protest against the regime spread rapidly and resulted in extreme violence, suppression, and riots. Nicolae Ceaușescu, the leader of the Romanian Communist Party, fled by helicopter, which allowed a new group called the National Salvation Front (NSF) to seize power. Following this seizure of power, more violence broke out when the NSF opened fire on those cadres considered loyal to the old regime, killing nearly 1,000 people.²⁷ Ceaușescu was later tried and executed, making Romania the only country to violently eliminate its communist leader. As a result, Romania exists as a point of contrast to the other revolutions of 1989, as their revolution is considered to be an exception to the rule of peaceful resistance and transfer of power.

One factor that may have contributed to the sudden violence of the Romanian revolution was the lack of precedent for peaceful protest in Romania. This is notable when compared to

²⁵ Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, xix.

²⁶ Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 19.

²⁷ Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, 1.

Czechoslovakia and other Soviet-controlled countries. While Czechoslovaks experienced the Prague Spring twenty years earlier and established a tradition of nonviolent resistance, there was little to no evidence of this occurring in Romania. Food was scarce in Romania during the decade leading up to the revolution, and “from this land of scarcity there also emerged persistent reports of serious human rights abuses.”²⁸ Despite the fact that Romanians suffered greatly under the regime, the people did not openly express dissent.²⁹ Given the terrible conditions and extreme totalitarian leadership of Romania during the time, their revolution could be viewed as something of a snap or a break among its citizens.

Comparatively speaking, the Romanian state was also more repressive than other Eastern European regimes. Siani-Davies argues that the country at the time could be categorized as “neo-Stalinist,” with a cult of personality around Ceaușescu similar to that of Stalin.³⁰ The strong cult of personality is a marked difference from Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries. Because of Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika policies, which allowed for greater freedom of speech, the Soviet Union’s hold on its satellite countries had begun to weaken. However, this was less true in Romania. In 1983, the government mandated that all typewriters must be registered with the state and demanded special permission be granted to make photocopies.³¹ These laws were direct attacks on an ability to openly criticize the government and made it more difficult for Romanian citizens to spread dissident ideas.

Despite their vastly different revolutions, Romania being the most violent and Czechoslovakia the most peaceful, these two countries had the largest secret police presence among the Eastern bloc. Perhaps the presence of a central moral authority—a person who could

²⁸ Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, 11.

²⁹ Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, 13.

³⁰ Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, 16.

³¹ Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, 11-12.

express ideas with the written word—made the difference in the Czech case. Havel served as a rallying point by setting a precedent for nonviolent protest based in intellectual arguments.

Romania lacked the same kind of focal point. Siani-Davies notes, “The new leaders who actually took power were hardly the fresh faces that were seen elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Romania had no equivalent of Václav Havel or Lech Wałęsa.”³² This absence gave way to such a bloody and swift revolution.

An Intellectual Revolution

Although the revolutions of 1989 all began under communist regimes and each for the most part had a central unifying figure or symbol, they approached resistance differently. For the Velvet Revolution, students, scholars, and writers were the forces behind dissidence. This meant that much of the resistance took place in an intellectual sphere, with an emphasis on words and discourse. Writers and intellectuals launched attacks on the regime’s rhetoric and cautioned of the dangers of steadfast belief in ideology without questioning. Dissidents like Havel weakened the hold the totalitarian government had on its people by “refusing to accept or live within the lie, the dissident threatens to break the...ideologically based system” which “is concerned with controlling society at a much more fundamental level.”³³ This central concept made the Velvet Revolution intellectual in nature, as dissidents examined the thought processes behind methods of control, and differentiated it from the other movements in 1989.

³² Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, 270.

³³ Robin Shepherd, *Czechoslovakia: The Velvet Revolution and Beyond* (n.p.: Palgrave Macmillian, 2000), 42, ProQuest.

Havel focused on scholarly and intellectual arguments as the basis of resistance and even downplayed his own contributions on occasion. In a letter to Adam Michnik, a Polish dissident, Havel discusses the publishing of his famous essay “The Power of the Powerless” as part of a group of critical works. He describes his contribution as “rather journalistic” and insists that he is “not a political scientist, or a philosopher, or a historian; therefore it is even better if other contributions happen to be of a more scholarly kind.”³⁴ Despite his insistence otherwise, the intellectual basis of Havel’s writings allowed him to become a moral authority in his own right.

Other intellectuals, writers, and scholars in Czechoslovakia also paved the way for the Velvet Revolution by setting up a foundation for resistance. In the decades leading up to the revolution, Jan Patočka was considered the greatest Czech philosopher and heavily influenced dissident thought in Czechoslovakia. Patočka’s views on phenomenology, a philosophical school concerned with structures of human existence, were an essential building block for dissent. Dissidents “supported universal and absolute human rights” and therefore “required an equally universal and absolute philosophical understanding of human existence that human rights should defend.” Patočka further argues that, “Politics should create a just social environment that guarantees the right to lead a virtuous life, to be human.”³⁵ His influence reflects how political arguments based in scholarly fields, such as philosophy, took precedence in Czechoslovakia.

The intellectual core of Czechoslovak resistance meant that not only were writers respected, but also that the movement itself is inseparable from the written works that defined it. Political theorist Jeffrey Isaac remarks, “It is true that in most cases the authors of these texts were not professional philosophers or academic political theorists. But the fact that these writers

³⁴ Václav Havel and Adam Michnik, *An Uncanny Era: Conversations Between Václav Havel and Adam Michnik*, trans. and ed. Elzbieta Matynia (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2014), 23.

³⁵ Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 2000), 19.

brazenly defy political and disciplinary frontiers should make them even more compelling.”³⁶

Similarly, scholar Delia Popescu remarks, “Dissidents did not merely record their experiences in political engagement, they gave them meaning, drew conclusions, and on this basis, they fashioned new ways of strategic action.”³⁷ Havel is the quintessential example of this ability—he was not a trained politician or philosopher, but he could express a kind of moral thought that translated well into action. A biographer of Havel describes his thought as “crystal-like in its moral clarity and consistency,”³⁸ and Daniel Brennan, a scholar of philosophy, writes that Havel was “concerned with how an individual frames their identity in the world and [was] warning of the danger of using ideology to frame one’s decisions.”³⁹ Havel’s writing reflects an internal integrity and emphasizes the notion of personal responsibility in taking political action. The themes expressed in his writing—such as freedom, ideology, personal truth, and moral responsibility—came together to create a defined set of values that allowed resisters to focus their movement and envision democratic change.

An Understanding of Resistance

Resistance is not an easily defined concept. However, there are certain features that emerge as commonalities among resistance. Means of resistance vary but oftentimes they fall into two broad categories: violent and nonviolent. Even if the oppressor engages in violent acts, a revolution can still be considered nonviolent if the resisters engage in forms of peaceful protest,

³⁶ Jeffrey C. Isaac, “The Strange Silence of Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 23, no. 4 (November 1995): 640.

³⁷ Delia Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel’s Thought: The Responsibility of Resistance* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 22.

³⁸ Michael Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life* (New York: Atlantic Books, 2014), 2.

³⁹ David Brennan, *The Political Thought of Václav Havel: Philosophical Influences and Contemporary Applications* (Leiden, NL: Brill Rodopi, 2017), 21.

like demonstrations, strikes and publications of critical writing. A nonviolent revolution typically builds up over time and grows into a larger movement of discontent, as was the case with most of the revolutions of 1989. In contrast, violent revolutions like Romania's come on more suddenly and show little to no signs of discontent prior to the overthrow of the government.

A forcible change in government, or an attempt to do so, characterizes most revolutions. At the end of a "successful" revolution, the governing power is removed and replaced, signaling a regime change. Sometimes the change in government is accompanied by the emergence of free elections, but not always. This definition places the Velvet Revolution as a successful revolution on both fronts. The communist government vacated their positions, and the people elected Havel as president.

Revolutions depend on context. They arise out of the particular politics, economics, and social structures of a country, which makes it difficult to categorize them. Therefore, it is necessary to examine a country from all of these angles before assessing the nature of a resistance movement and the resulting political change. Under this framework of resistance, it becomes clear that Havel was able to rise as a leader in his own right because of the conditions in his country and of the Velvet Revolution.

Chapter 2

From Playwright to Dissident

Havel's journey from playwright to political dissident to eventual president is a remarkable one that speaks volumes about the role of the writer during revolutions. His life and work exemplifies the authority and trust placed in those who can write, which is what makes the Velvet Revolution so unique among revolutions throughout history.

Havel understands his contribution to the Velvet Revolution as a writer first and foremost; Havel remarked in an interview conducted in 1991 by Karel Hvizdala that he's "never taken a systemic interest in politics, political science, or economics; I've never had a clear-cut political position, much less expressed it in public." Rather, Havel saw himself as a writer and "understood [his] mission to be to speak the truth about the world...to bear witness to its terrors and its miseries—in other words, to warn rather than hand out prescriptions for change."⁴⁰ Havel understood his role as a writer as that of an observer and commentator. Through the written word, Havel could translate experiences and express them. The Czechoslovak people identified with these experiences and were able to more clearly see the problems in their society, which prompted them to act on these injustices. Havel's ability to provoke action among the people is what made his writing so effective throughout all the changes in his career.

⁴⁰ Václav Havel and Karel Hvizdala, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 8.

Back to the Beginning: Early Influences on Havel's Thought

Havel's formative experiences defined for him what it meant to be effective as an author. According to Popescu, Havel cultivated an early interest in literature by starting to read at a young age. His wealthy family had a well-stocked library that contained works from some of the greatest writers in his country.⁴¹ Through his early discoveries of literature, the importance of writing was imprinted in Havel's mind.

However, recognizing the value of literature meant greater disappointment for Havel after the 1948 communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, which resulted in harsh censorship. Havel was born in 1936, so he was just about to enter his teenage years when the communist government came into power and banned around seven million books. In the new Czechoslovakia, Popescu notes that, "the abstract, creative minds of modern literature did not fit the rigidity of Socialist Realism."⁴² Any works that did not conform to communist ideology were to be suppressed. This practice of censorship laid the foundation for Havel's steadfast belief that ideology should never be wholly accepted without question.

Havel also felt the negative effects of coming from an affluent, bourgeois family in Prague after the communist coup d'état. The new government's rhetoric labeled the bourgeoisie as "enemies of the people," and Havel's family were the targets of a newfound "class warfare." The state considered anyone of a higher socioeconomic class to be a threat to communist society. Being a part of the enemy class created a constant sense of exclusion for Havel, who often felt "instability of [his] place in the world" as a child. This experience as an outsider gave Havel the

⁴¹ Popescu, *Political Action*, 23.

⁴² Popescu, *Political Action*, 23-24.

ability to see “the absurd dimensions of the world and his own existence.”⁴³ By growing up in a class demonized and ostracized by those in power, Havel could better see and write about social injustices he observed.

As part of the bourgeoisie, Havel was denied access to a traditional education. According to biographer Michael Zantovsky, Havel had to attend classes in the evening, where he would be unable to “contaminate the pure consciousness of the children of the working class.”⁴⁴ It was at these evening classes that Havel continued to solidify his love for literature and intellectual discourse. He helped found an informal debating society of other “misfits” called the Thirty-Sixers, named after Havel’s birth year.⁴⁵ The Thirty-Sixers would gather after these classes and have intellectual conversations. These meetings initially focused on politics, economics, and philosophy, but the group later delved into discussing more artistic pursuits like dance, music, photography, and poetry. Following the dissolution of the Thirty-Sixers, Havel attended literary discussions in places like Café Slavia in Prague. He kept reading, and his “literary ‘profile’ was shaped by Hrabal’s unpublished writings, by Patočka’s ‘black’ university, by Kafka’s forbidden manuscripts.”⁴⁶ With his activity in the Thirty-Sixers, his independent reading, and the beginnings of his own interest in writing, Havel started to formulate a base for his own ideas. He started his writing career influenced by authors that challenged what constituted “acceptable thought.” These experiences shaped Havel’s tendencies of observing from the outside, of looking at society from a critical eye, and of using writing as a tool to critique injustices.

⁴³ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 6.

⁴⁴ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 33.

⁴⁵ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 34.

⁴⁶ Popescu, *Political Action*, 24.

Havel and the Theater

Havel's early exposure to the arts as a subversive act made its way into his playwriting in the 1960s during his 20s and 30s. He was most active as a playwright during the relaxed censorship under Alexander Dubček's leadership. Havel utilized his plays to subtly criticize the communist regime, and his roots as a dissident can be found in those scripts.

Havel first became interested in theater during his time in the Czechoslovak army from 1957 to 1959, when he founded his own regimental theatre company.⁴⁷ One of his earliest attempts at embedding satire into written work was a play he wrote with a fellow soldier called "The Life Ahead." Havel describes the play as "at once 'socialist-realist' and 'daringly critical.'"⁴⁸ Disguised as a super serious play, "The Life Ahead" tells the story of an ordinary soldier falling asleep on duty at the same time that another soldier shoots an intruder to their camp. The sleeping soldier is then lauded as a hero for defeating the threat but eventually has to admit his mistake.⁴⁹ The play earned a performance at an all-army festival, which attracted the attention of the military's administration, and it was then "condemned as anti-army...that the play did not sufficiently exalt the role of the regimental party organization, or that it was unthinkable for a Czechoslovak soldier to fall asleep while on guard duty."⁵⁰ This incident reflects how the regime enforced its ideology in every aspect of life, even in plays and other forms of entertainment or artistic activity.

Havel later became a part of Prague's theater scene in the 1960s as part of the Theater on the Balustrade. In the 1950s, theater in Czechoslovakia was dominated by "stone theaters,"

⁴⁷ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 37.

⁴⁸ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 39.

⁴⁹ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 47.

⁵⁰ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 39.

which only showed plays that adhered strictly to communist ideology. However, with the rise of new “small theaters,” there was a different type of playwriting that took center stage: “Suddenly, groups of people heard what for a long time no one had been allowed to say, even in secret...they began to free themselves from fear, to formulate their feelings, to laugh.”⁵¹ Plays became more critical of society and expressed a wider range of emotions than they did during the stone theater era. As a result of these plays, audiences began to question the propaganda they had been exposed to.

Havel’s plays often utilized a subtle means of criticism. An example of this was his tendency to include “a character or two, perhaps silent, who represent the omnipresent repressive state.”⁵² One of his plays, “The Garden Party,” features a main character, Hugo, who experiences a “loss of identity [that] occurs through his confrontation with a depersonalized and dehumanized system, which is only capable of expressing itself in meaningless and contradictory phrases.”⁵³ Such a system mirrors that of communism, in that its ideology consistently contradicted itself. Other characters in “The Garden Party” satirize the “meaningless and contradictory phrases” of communism. In the play, the Liquidation Office holds a garden party that the Hugo’s parents force him to attend. The characters that work in the office represent people that conformed, and their dialogue subtly criticizes this obedience:

“CLERK: Or the programme of humourous stories from the liquation practice of Section

5 which have been written down and will be narrated by the head of Section 5—

SECRETARY: And in which you yourself can participate, provided you have sent the exact text of your story together with a health certificate and a permit from the

⁵¹ Eda Kriseová, *Václav Havel: The Authorized Biography* (n.p.: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 30.

⁵² Robert Skloot, "Václav Havel: The Once and Future Playwright," *The Kenyon Review* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 224. Accessed October 16, 2018. JSTOR.

⁵³ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 71.

Head of your Section to the Secretariat of Humour and to the Ideological Regulation Commission at the latest two months before the date of this garden party.”⁵⁴

In this exchange, the clerk and the secretary the strict monitoring of all aspects of society, as control even extends to the telling of humorous stories. The Liquidation Office workers also reflect Havel’s belief that ideology is dangerous because it creates a mindless sort of obedience. This obedience, in turn, allows the totalitarian system to maintain its power, a point that would later become essential to Havel’s political essays.

Havel also used his plays to criticize the communist bureaucracy. The government relied heavily on bureaucracies to not only push their ideology, but also to run the country. In “The Memorandum,” a director of an unnamed organization receives a document written in a made up language called Ptydepe, which was designed to “make office communications more accurate and introduce precision and order into their terminology.”⁵⁵ Ptydepe has a large number of rules that need to be followed in order to write and read in it, making it less efficient and more burdensome than intended. Such inefficiency is a common side effect of bureaucracy and is precisely what Havel criticizes.

During his time as a playwright, Havel solidified his view of the regime, many of which would become foundational to his political writing. Aspects of the government he satirized in his plays, such as mindless ideology and inefficient bureaucracy, were directly addressed in his political writing in the coming decades.

⁵⁴ Václav Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 12.

⁵⁵ Havel, *The Garden*, 58.

Roots of Havel's Dissidence: Prague Spring and the Culture of Normalization

Havel's transition from playwright to dissident writer was influenced by the conditions in Czechoslovakia during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. The Prague Spring of the late 1960s gave the public a taste of freedom, while normalization in the 1970s created growing discontent. Both eras laid the groundwork for both the Velvet Revolution and for a writer like Havel to emerge as a leader of the people.

In 1968, the election of reformist Alexander Dubček as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) jumpstarted a period of almost nonexistent censorship and greater individual rights. During Prague Spring, artists and writers flourished, producing works that would have previously been banned from publication. The country also experienced a decentralization of the economy, and citizens were given more democratic rights, such as freedom of speech and expression. Dubček's policies aimed for "socialism with a human face" and a reformed version of communism. Dubček and other reform communists based their ideologies around "the belief that a reformed, more humane and democratic version of communism is the best they can hope for."⁵⁶ The idea was to create change within the existing system to achieve a utopian socialist society closer to what communism was supposed to be. Dubček stated in April of 1968 that Czechoslovaks were "witnesses to unprecedented activities of the party" and that there would not be a "weakening of the leading role of the communist party, but the party [would] assume a more effective and purposeful role."⁵⁷

Prague Spring opened the doors for freedom of speech and individual rights, and the reforms made throughout 1968 created a cumulative democratization. However, this was not the

⁵⁶ Jiri Pehe, ed., *The Prague Spring: A Mixed Legacy* (New York: Freedom House, 1988), 3.

⁵⁷ Czech News Agency, "CTK on Dubček Speech," *Czech News Agency*, [Page #], Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

aim of the Communist Party, and evidence points to democratization as an unintended consequence of reform. Miklós Kun, a Hungarian historian who interviewed numerous Soviet politicians that held office during Prague Spring, discovered that the president of Czechoslovakia at the time, Antonín Novotný, initially believed Dubček would hold to the party lines. According to Stephan Chervonenko, the Soviet ambassador to Prague at the time, “in that situation Dubček seemed a better candidate than the others from the point of view of principle.”⁵⁸ Throughout the rest of the interview, Kun notes Chervonenko looking uncomfortable when asked certain questions about Dubček’s appointment, indicating that perhaps some members of the Soviet government felt they had made a mistake.

The relaxing of censorship in particular created a problem for the Communist Party, as it allowed for people to openly and directly criticize those in power. This allowed the Czechoslovak people to see the problems with their government more clearly. Prague Spring also cultivated a value of artistic activity, freedom of thought, and open discourse. The arts and culture became an important ideological building block of Prague Spring. According to Kusin, “Of all the activities outside the governmental structure, the arts were best disposed to present to the Czechoslovak public an overall criticism of the regime.”⁵⁹ The press was also allowed greater freedom in what they could print, as indicated by Jiri Hochman’s essay “Words and Tanks.” Hochman opens his piece with an example from a Czechoslovak newspaper called *Prace*. *Prace* was the official daily morning newspaper of the trade unions, and they ran a story about a general in the army who defected after being under investigation for black-market trading.⁶⁰ The staff of the newspaper received no punishment for publishing such a story. This example

⁵⁸ Miklós Kun, *Prague Spring, Prague Fall: Blank Spots of 1968* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1999), 11.

⁵⁹ Kusin, *Václav Havel*, 53.

⁶⁰ Pehe, *The Prague Spring*, 27.

exemplifies the “collapse of censorship” during Prague Spring, which was “in itself a phenomenon.”⁶¹ The gradual breakdown of censorship allowed for information to be distributed to the public without it being fed to them by the government.

Literature was not only less censored but also became a symbol of Prague Spring, particularly in the form of author Franz Kafka. Although Kafka wrote primarily in the early twentieth century, the government later vilified him under the doctrine of “Socialist Realism,” which was the ideology that all works of art and literature had to adhere to. The Soviet Union proclaimed the doctrine of Socialist Realism in 1934, and as a result, “the Stalinist writers of literary history, by the logic of their own ideology, were forced to label Kafka a ‘representative of imperialist literature and decadence.’”⁶² Thirty-four years later, Prague Spring provided Czechoslovaks with a means of rediscovering Kafka as part of their literary history. His legacy became a symbol of literary freedom.

However, the Soviet Union viewed this flourishing of artistic activity and vocal criticism as dangerous to their power. As put by Jiri Pehe, “the democratization process tends to snowball and is difficult to stop.”⁶³ Removing censorship significantly weakened the Soviet Union’s hold over Czechoslovakia. In response to this threat to power, the Warsaw Pact, led by Soviet troops, invaded the country in August of 1968 and occupied it. The Soviets sent leaders in the Politburo that were involved in reforms to Moscow on August 21st and forced them to sign a document known as the Moscow Protocols. The protocols stated that any politician who signed renounced their reforms.

⁶¹ Pehe, *The Prague Spring*, 27.

⁶² E. Bahr, "Kafka and the Prague Spring," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1970): 18, JSTOR.

⁶³ Pehe, *The Prague Spring*, 3.

The military shutdown and subsequent silencing of reformers made a lasting impression on many who lived through 1968. Frantisek Janouch, a member of the Czechoslovak government during the reform period, was the only person taken to Moscow who refused to sign the protocols. He later said of the invasion: “It is our duty to keep recalling the nocturnal intervention of an army of a half-million in a peacefully sleeping country...until a remedy is introduced.”⁶⁴ The Soviet response to Prague Spring showed that any promise of reform and greater freedom would always be purely illusory under their control.

What followed the military invasion was a period of so-called “normalization,” which attempted to reinstate complete communist control over Czechoslovakia. The new leaders of the Czechoslovak government following 1968 aimed for “positioning themselves in opposition to the (irrational) reform communists...and to proffer their vision of normalization as an antidote to the ‘abnormalcy’ of the Prague Spring.”⁶⁵ The culture of normalization was placed in direct contrast to the reforms of the previous decade. The juxtaposition of an era of freedom followed immediately by an era of suppression was a shock to the people and grounds for developing resentment. Normalization also signaled a return to harsh censorship as the government attempted to reinstate old policies that restricted the flow of information. The new First Secretary, Gustav Husák, began “cleansing” the government by dismissing reformists in the party and shutting down any reformist newspapers, journals, and magazines.⁶⁶ In the aftermath of Prague Spring, it was the media that “came under the closest scrutiny.”⁶⁷ Censorship once again created an environment where it was dangerous for writers to express anything that stepped

⁶⁴ Pehe, *The Prague Spring*, 19.

⁶⁵ Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2010), 90.

⁶⁶ Bren, *The Greengrocer*, 36.

⁶⁷ Bren, *The Greengrocer*, 36.

outside the accepted ideology—which made it all the more remarkable that writers like Havel even published their criticisms at all.

Normalization's politics shaped the writers and dissidents that became part of resistance movements. Milan Uhde, a Brno-based playwright, wrote about normalization's "mechanisms of ostracization" which "led him, almost unwittingly, down the path toward dissent."⁶⁸ After experiencing a time of cultural flourishing and seeming democratization, going back to a completely oppressive state gave the people a reason to resist the regime. Following Prague Spring, a new generation of students and thinkers led by Havel's thinking, writing, and moral philosophy formed the backbone of the Velvet Revolution. The Soviet purging of the government as well as any political opposition unintentionally drew people towards resistance. Bren notes that the post-1968 dissidents were made of "former communists from the 1950s, drawn to reform communism during the 1960s and purged for it in the 70s."⁶⁹ It was at this point where those that once held hope for a reformed version of communism came to the realization that it would be impossible under the current regime—or perhaps even at all. Under such hopeless and despair-inducing conditions, how should a writer like Havel respond? His answer was to get political.

⁶⁸ Bren, *The Greengrocer*, 91.

⁶⁹ Bren, *The Greengrocer*, 90.

Chapter 3

The Politicization of Havel

From Playwright to Dissident

The conditions of normalization motivated a push for democracy. Havel was among those who shifted to dissident activity throughout the 1970s, during normalization's peak. He moved away from being strictly a playwright and became a political writer who actively criticized the government. The reinstatement of censorship made Havel's dissident writing during the 1970s an even more remarkable—and dangerous—undertaking. The journey of Havel's writing ultimately represents that of an artist to a political activist and shows that the two are not always mutually exclusive. Through his transition from playwright to dissident, Havel redefined what it means to be a writer in the context of resistance.

In November 1976, Havel wrote a play called *The Beggar's Opera*, an adaptation of a satiric opera written by John Gay in the 18th century. Havel's version was very political in its satire. Its performance resulted in a crackdown by the secret police and the “theatrical establishment was...warned of dire consequences for the artistic freedom not only of the likes of Havel, but of Czech theatre in general.”⁷⁰ According to Zantovsky, evidence suggests that the performance was an intentional act of rebellion, showing how Havel was beginning to transition from subtle criticism to outright dissent.

⁷⁰ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 157.

It was also around this time that Havel penned his infamous “Dear Dr. Husák,” a letter addressed to the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Published in 1975, the letter critiques Husák’s leadership. Throughout the piece, Havel asserts that fear is what made people follow the regime’s orders. According to Havel’s argument, people did not adhere to mandated actions out of voluntary desire, but rather out of a fear of retribution: “We are concerned with fear in a deeper sense...the more or less conscious participation in the collective awareness of a permanent and ubiquitous danger.”⁷¹ The fear that Havel describes was ever-present and enforced by both the police state and the institutions in power. The culture of normalization created “a system of existential pressure...a hideous spider whose invisible web runs right through the whole of society.”⁷² This was a direct attack on the regime exercising control over all aspects of society. With “Dear Mr. Husák,” Havel moved away from “hiding” his views behind plays. Now, he was directly addressing those responsible for oppression.

Havel took an even more public stance against injustice when he helped found the Charter 77 movement, which “defined itself as a ‘free, informal, open community of people with different convictions, different faiths, and different professions united by the will to strive...for the respect of civic and human rights in our own country and throughout the world.’”⁷³ The group formed after the arrest of the Plastic People of the Universe, a Czech psychedelic rock band. Havel said of founding Charter 77: “I felt we had to do something not only on principle—because something ought to be done when someone is unjustly arrested—but also because of the special significance this case seemed to have, a meaning that seemed to transcend the details.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 53.

⁷² Havel, *Open Letters*, 54.

⁷³ Michael Kraus, “Did the Charter 77 Movement Bring an End to Communism?,” *New England Review* 28, no. 2 (2007): 134.

⁷⁴ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 128.

According to Havel, the group was bound by “equality, solidarity, conviviality, togetherness, and willingness to help each other.”⁷⁵ The first meeting of Charter 77 was held in December 1976 and became a major influence for future dissidents. Over the course of thirteen years, Charter 77 released around six hundred reports that detailed human rights violations and failures of the government in education, environmental issues, health, and criminal justice.⁷⁶ Throughout its history, the group stayed unified through similar goals and a vision of freedom for Czechoslovakia.

The movement’s infamous “Charter 77” manifesto also shows the power of the written word. The document, drafted and published in 1977, directly protested the arrest of the Plastic People of the Universe. It criticized the government for failing to follow the human rights policies in the Helsinki Accords. Various artists, writers, and thinkers signed the petition, and its group of signatories represented the intellectualism that would come to define Czechoslovak dissidence. Charter 77’s manifesto showed the viability of the written word as a form of resistance, and future dissident groups would publish petitions of their own.

The ideas expressed in “Charter 77” also set a precedent for the morals that would guide the Velvet Revolution. The document directly attacked the government’s use of censorship and prohibiting of free speech: “No philosophical, political or scientific view or artistic activity that departs ever so slightly from the narrow bounds of official ideology or aesthetics is allowed to be published.”⁷⁷ Again, the emphasis here is placed on public discourse, ideology, and intellectual authority. Charter 77 questioned who had the right to limit what people can and cannot believe. Through their manifesto and other documents, Charter 77 was able to undermine “the

⁷⁵ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 132.

⁷⁶ Kraus, "Did the Charter," 135.

⁷⁷ Václav Havel, "Declaration of Charter 77," January 1, 1977, accessed April 11, 2018, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/628>.

government monopoly on information.”⁷⁸ If Havel’s individual writing reflects the possibilities of written resistance acting as a singular person, then Charter 77 becomes the model of group resistance.

As a piece of writing, the Charter 77 manifesto is a lot more straightforward and less philosophical than Havel’s other political works. The document opens by briefly describing the Helsinki Accords and their history before launching into an attack on the government’s failure to follow the human rights provisions, declaring that the right to expression “is in our case purely illusory.”⁷⁹ The manifesto openly attacks the regime in a way that leaves no room for misinterpretation. Even the language itself is very direct and without a lot of stylistic experimentation, which contrasts with some of Havel’s solo work. “Charter 77” tends to stick to the facts, citing statistics and specific examples of human rights abuses. The appeal to pure logic differs from political essays where Havel is the sole author. In those pieces, Havel engages in more philosophical and abstract writing to appeal to the reader’s sense of morals.

Although perhaps not quite as poetic as some of Havel’s other work, “Charter 77” still remains a strong piece of resistance writing. Its effectiveness stems from the clarity and directness, as it addresses grievances with the government while defining Charter 77’s identity as an informal group dedicated to fighting for the common good. The document asserts that the group simply wishes to “conduct a constructive dialogue with the political and state authorities”⁸⁰ to promote the interests of the general public. It also gives specific examples of how the government has clearly violated the human rights protocols in the Helsinki Accords. In doing so, the manifesto effectively outlines the group’s goals and structure—or purposeful lack

⁷⁸ Kraus, "Did the Charter," 135.

⁷⁹ Václav Havel, "Declaration of Charter 77."

⁸⁰ Václav Havel, "Declaration of Charter 77."

thereof—in a manner that clearly signals their dissent. Furthermore, “Charter 77” showed people in Eastern Europe the possibilities for resistance and how it might be possible to fight oppression while staying true to ideals. The Charter 77 movement and manifesto played a vital role in shaping Czechoslovak resistance as well as Havel’s own activity as a dissident. Now, his name was on a document that openly and publicly criticized the regime—there was no more hiding criticism in metaphors, dialogue, and fictional characters. By joining Charter 77, Havel redefined his role as a writer into something outwardly political.

The Power of Living in Truth

Following the Charter 77 manifesto, Havel wrote “The Power of the Powerless” in 1979, a political essay that explored how the regime operates, how it sustains itself, and how people might begin to resist its oppression. Throughout the essay, Havel provides a “blueprint” of sorts for ways to resist. In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel argues that following the ideology and mandated actions of communism is what allows it to be sustained. Havel writes that ideology is a “veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo,”⁸¹ meaning that it creates an illusion that everything in society is as it should be. To combat this effect, Havel encourages citizens to form their own “spheres of truth” and live by their own ideals instead of blindly accepting what the regime tells them.

“The Power of the Powerless” is an extremely effective piece of political writing, both in the strength of Havel’s ideals and the rhetorical devices he utilizes. To great effect, Havel structures the essay in multiple sections that build upon one another conceptually. This is an

⁸¹ Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 1979

organizational strategy that makes his writing more accessible by starting with simple concepts before moving on to more complicated theories. Havel also breaks down terms like “resistance,” “dissident,” and “opposition.” In addition, he proposes that Czechoslovakia is a “post-totalitarian” system, which differs from the traditional understanding of a dictatorship. By clearly outlining the power structures at play, Havel strengthens his argument.

Havel did not completely forget about his playwright background in his political essays, and much of his commentary on politics has an almost theatrical aspect about it. He frequently calls upon the people to take action. Particularly in “The Power of the Powerless,” he asks people to “live within the truth,” which is a poetic way of phrasing resistance. Not only that, but he makes connections to certain aspects of communism that he satirized in his plays. Havel writes that there is a “faceless” quality to the leadership within the Communist Party, and that it “frequently it seems as though ritual alone carries people from obscurity into the light of power.”⁸² Havel argues that leaders rise to power in the post-totalitarian regime by adhering to the system’s ideology instead of campaigning on independent ideas and beliefs. The lack of independent thought in leadership can be seen in the Liquidation Office workers in “The Garden Party,” all of whom speak and act in a manner consistent with the rules, ideals, and procedures of the Communist Party. This connection between “The Garden Party” and “The Power of the Powerless” shows that even though Havel moved from plays to political essays, he still maintains similar beliefs. By extending these beliefs to his essays, Havel redefines the writer as someone that can express political opinions.

Havel also utilizes literary conventions to get his points across through devices like metaphors, analogies, and characters. In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel assembles “a cast

⁸² Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 33.

of characters” to demonstrate his main argument: “the greengrocer, his customer, and later, the ‘dissident’ brewmaster Š, and their antagonist, the ‘automatized’ system...play out the drama inherent in post-totalitarianism.”⁸³ These “characters” give the reader something concrete to latch on to, which is especially helpful when dealing with the more theoretical and abstract concepts in the essay. Havel relates these characters to one another with metaphors and analogies to demonstrate how the post-totalitarian system functions.

The greengrocer character stands out as a portrayal of the average Czechoslovak living under communism. The greengrocer acts as a trope within the essay throughout the first half of “The Power of the Powerless.” His primary role is to illustrate the difference between “living within the lie” and “living within the truth.” The reader is informed in the third section of the essay that the greengrocer has placed a sign with the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” in his window. Havel writes that while the greengrocer might not necessarily believe in this sentiment or derive any meaning from it, the rhetoric of the slogan is still consistent with communist ideology. The greengrocer hung the sign in his window only because “it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be.”⁸⁴ For Havel, ideology touches all aspects of life. Communism then begins to infiltrate consciousness, as the “slogan’s real meaning...is rooted firmly in the greengrocer’s existence.”⁸⁵ The greengrocer shows that the post-totalitarian system only functions when its people choose to “live within the lie” and perpetuate the idea of a good “socialist citizen.”

Throughout the rest of the essay, Havel continues using the greengrocer as an analogy for the average citizen. The greengrocer later resists in smaller ways, such as refusing to put up

⁸³ Paul Wilson, "The Power of the Powerless Revisited," *East European Politics and Societies* 32, no. 2 (May 2018): 235, JSTOR.

⁸⁴ Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 27.

⁸⁵ Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 28.

slogans in his window, to vote in rigged elections, and to hide what he believes at political meetings. For Havel, these actions constitute a refusal to “live within the lie.”⁸⁶ The extended metaphor of the greengrocer makes an effective point about this performative nature of ideology. By refusing to perform certain “rituals” to perpetuate communist rhetoric, he weakens it. This point is central to “The Power of the Powerless” and is one that would become foundational to the Velvet Revolution’s concept of resistance. With the greengrocer, Havel applied his literary background to philosophical principles and theories, which ultimately made his writing more accessible to people. This accessibility meant he reached a wider audience of people and encouraged them to take action.

Another interesting aspect to note about “The Power of the Powerless,” and many of Havel’s other political writings, is its departure from the messages of his plays. Similar to the greengrocer, Havel’s plays frequently featured a protagonist attempting to fight in some way against oppression. However, as Paul Wilson rightly points out, the plays’ central characters still choose to “live within the lie” and “they end up perpetuating the system that has enslaved and humiliated them...it is the dark side—the system, entropy, falsehood, death—that triumphs.”⁸⁷ For example, at the end of “The Garden Party,” the protagonist Hugo becomes the head of the Central Inauguration and Liquidation Committee and completely loses his identity to the state. The system wins over the “good” of individuality, freedom, and identity.

However, Wilson notes that Havel’s political essays turn the tables on the tragic message of his dramas. In his essays, the “belief that positive change, in harmony with the genuine aims of life, is not only possible but almost inevitable...it is life, truth, moral integrity, and human

⁸⁶ Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 39.

⁸⁷ Wilson, “The Power,” 235.

authenticity that have the upper hand.”⁸⁸ This reversal of themes—that humans may enact change by assuming moral responsibility and taking action—served a dual purpose in cultivating resistance. First, Havel effectively weakened the regime by poking holes in their propaganda and rhetoric. Second, Havel’s writing spread ideas that took root among the people and offered the people alternative perspectives.

Not only did Havel provide the people with an understanding of how oppression impacted their daily lives, but he also offered a means by which the people could resist. By “living within the truth” and rejecting the performance of ideology, a person “threatens [the regime] in its entirety.”⁸⁹ As discussed in previous sections of this thesis, the Velvet Revolution was largely an intellectual movement based on chipping away at the rhetoric of the communist regime; “The Power of the Powerless” forms the basis for this idea. “Opposition,” in Havel’s view, is anyone that dares to live outside of these rituals; this means that living within the truth “can be any means by which a person or a group revolts against manipulation,” an idea that opened the door for any citizen to resist.⁹⁰ “The Power of the Powerless” outlines a clear means by which to strike at the regime’s dominance. By spreading the idea that individuals could resist, Havel quite literally gave power to the powerless.

The Consequences of Dissidence

Havel’s willingness to publicize his political views under such strict censorship did not go unnoticed by the government. In 1978, the police began monitoring Havel after he narrowly escaped arrest the year before. He and his wife moved to a home in the country to try and escape

⁸⁸ Wilson, “The Power,” 234-235.

⁸⁹ Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 40.

⁹⁰ Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 43.

surveillance, but the “authorities apparently much preferred Havel at his country place, where he could be more easily watched and isolated.”⁹¹ He was arrested in May 1979 for his work as part of the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Prosecuted, which was a group that formed out of Charter 77. The committee released reports to the public about court and police abuses.⁹² Havel and ten other dissidents were put on trial for their activities over the previous two years, which resulted in a four and half year sentence in jail for Havel.⁹³

Records from Havel’s time in prison exist in files from the court and the prison as well as a series of letters he wrote to his wife, Olga. The letters reflect his state of mind while in prison, and Zantovsky describes them as “often elliptical and considerably abstract.”⁹⁴ Paul Wilson, who translated the letters into English, mentions that they do not detail much of Havel’s day-to-day experiences in prison due to the strict restriction of what he could write.⁹⁵ Havel was not allowed to write anything besides his weekly letter to Olga, and they remain the only pieces of writing about his imprisonment. Havel later remarked in an interview, “When I was in prison I thought constantly about what I would eventually write about it, and how. I tried to remember all those curious yet moving, comic yet shocking, strange yet typical experiences I had there...But when I got out again, I suddenly realized that I would probably never write anything about prison.”⁹⁶ He described his imprisonment as a “deeply existential and deeply personal experience”⁹⁷ that he could not put into words. Knowing what a personal experience this was for Havel makes his letters to Olga all the more valuable for analyzing his journey as a dissident.

⁹¹ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 208.

⁹² Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga: June 1979-September 1982* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 3.

⁹³ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 218.

⁹⁴ Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life*, 219.

⁹⁵ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 6.

⁹⁶ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 145.

⁹⁷ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 146.

Havel described the letters as taking on “a complex sort of self-fulfillment” for him and his fellow dissidents.⁹⁸ The prison placed a ban on certain aspects of writing such as quotation marks, underlined words, or foreign expressions. These rules were also applied to Olga’s replies, as he informed her in a letter dated January 27, 1980 that she needed to “(a) maintain the prescribed format; (b) not write [his] name on the envelope; (c) avoid writing things that could be construed as oblique references, hints, codes, or the like.”⁹⁹ The restrictions turned the letters into a challenge for Havel to focus on while in prison: “It became a kind of sport as well. Will we get something past the warden this time or won’t we? It became a passion.”¹⁰⁰ Havel also stated the letters allowed him to examine his viewpoints in a different way. This reflection may have refined his ideas and shaped his future writing.

Parts of the letters—particularly the ones from the start of his stay in prison—deal with inquiries from Havel regarding matters at home. He asks Olga to report on how she is doing: “Write me in detail about various friends and about your cultural activities. And in general, about how you live.”¹⁰¹ This curiosity about Olga’s life makes sense, as she was Havel’s only link to the outside world.

Underneath the surface of these simplistic questions about Olga’s life lies complicated feelings of hopelessness that were not as apparent in his political writing, which touted the triumph of hope and moral good over the evils of tyranny. In August of 1980, he finds his moods to be “changeable, depressions alternate with good spirits” and that “Some unpleasant triviality, some uncertainty, fear or danger, some minor vexation...can suddenly evoke despondency,

⁹⁸ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 149.

⁹⁹ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 150.

¹⁰¹ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 71.

nervousness, anxiety and alarm, a feeling of futility and despair.”¹⁰² Similarly, after a visit from Olga in June of 1980, Havel laments, “Nothing is fine, but you must know that and I’m sure you have no illusions about it...I am forced to admit that even in our world, not everything is as harmonious and fine as one would like.”¹⁰³ He later writes about feeling a “painful nostalgia”¹⁰⁴ that was not present in him before. These sentiments reveal a man struggling to comprehend his imprisonment and the tyranny under which he and his loved ones live. However, Havel still manages to maintain a sense of positivity through it all. In that same letter from June 1980, he goes on to describe how prison forces people to question the meaning of life, whether they want to or not. What Havel ultimately concludes is that meaning must come from inside an individual, and that he himself still believes there is a meaning to his existence.¹⁰⁵

By the end of his four-year imprisonment in 1982, Havel’s letters were more concerned with existential problems and contemplating the state of society and humanity. In a letter from May of that year, Havel details when he watched a weather forecast where the studio and sound cut out. However, the picture kept going instead of being replaced by the normal photographs used when there were technical difficulties. He describes the woman giving the forecast as “a confused, unhappy and terribly embarrassed woman...it was such an incisive representation of human vulnerability.”¹⁰⁶ Havel concludes from this incident, “the more transparently vulnerable and helpless humanity is, the more urgently does its misfortunate cry out for compassion.”¹⁰⁷ He then contemplates what it means to be a person and the reality of human subjectivity. In these letters, Havel defines and sharpens his personal understanding of humanity.

¹⁰² Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 100

¹⁰³ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 90.

¹⁰⁵ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 100-102

¹⁰⁶ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 323.

¹⁰⁷ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 323.

The letters also highlight the idea that people have a responsibility to match their actions to their words, or else those words will lose whatever meaning or “weight” that they have. Havel asserts in another letter that, “Words that are not backed up by life lose their weight...the final effect...is silence.”¹⁰⁸ Throughout his life after prison, Havel tried to live up to his words and believed strongly in the responsibility of each individual to put their ideals into action. Daniel Brennan argues that “Havel’s words carry ‘weight’ partly because of the situation of their composition...Havel writes while imprisoned for attempting to re-anchor his words to his actions.”¹⁰⁹ Havel’s words maintained their meaning precisely because he backed them up with his choices even after being arrested.

Through his letters to Olga, Havel formulated a more complex understanding of the human condition, which impacted his writing throughout the next decade. This strengthening of ideals, in turn, would enable him to become a strong leader for the revolution. Although he would go on to have multiple stays in prison, his sentence given in 1979 would be his longest—and the most important in shaping his dissidence.

Writing for a Velvet Revolution

Havel continued writing during the 1980s and solidifying his position as a moral leader. Many of his essays throughout the decade openly discussed and meditated on his work as a dissident. They offered more direct criticisms of communism. In this decade, Havel’s growth as

¹⁰⁸ Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 306.

¹⁰⁹ Brennan, *The Political Thought*, 122.

a leader shows the importance of the writer during the strongest time of resistance in Czechoslovakia.

Although not a piece of writing, the first interview given by Havel after his release from prison in 1983, titled “I Take the Side of Truth,” echoes many of the ideals embedded in his work. Havel speaks again of an individual’s responsibility to act in the face of injustice, stating that he felt it was his duty as a writer to express dissenting views even if it was dangerous for him.¹¹⁰ Havel also states that he does not have a particular political leaning. Rather, he sees himself as taking “the side of truth against lies, the side of sense against nonsense, the side of justice against injustice.”¹¹¹; the concept of “siding with truth” ties back to the central theme of “The Power of the Powerless.” Havel places an emphasis on universal themes, believing that no matter what political, national, or ideological political views a person holds, they should still embody certain values. For Havel, these values include morality, responsibility, justice, and individuality. Even after his time in prison, Havel still maintained—and perhaps even solidified—his beliefs on the importance of universal human truths.

The universality of Havel’s writing further becomes apparent in his essays throughout the 1980s. These works attempt to capture the nature of humanity and connect it to politics. In an essay written in 1984 called “Politics and Conscience,” Havel argues that concepts such as “justice, honor, treason, friendship, infidelity, courage, or empathy” have tangible impacts on human life, even without acknowledgment or analysis. He cites the collectivization policy as an example of this principle, in that it disrupted the boundary of the natural world in favor of higher production rates. In Havel’s view, any attempt to disrupt this boundary—even if it does have quantitative and measurable results in productivity—will have consequences on human life.

¹¹⁰ Havel, *Open Letters*, 247.

¹¹¹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 248.

Havel also maintains in “Politics and Conscience” that there was a “process by which power becomes anonymous and depersonalized, and reduced to a mere technology of rule and manipulation.”¹¹² This point about the depersonalization of authority originates from “The Power of the Powerless,” where he writes that politicians had become faceless. However, in “Politics and Conscience,” he takes the idea of the anonymous politician a step further by arguing that leaders used to be “still in some sense personally responsible for their deeds.” Havel criticizes the dominance of ideology over morality in communist politics. With “Politics and Conscience,” the themes in his writing remained consistent, allowing him to further build an ethos as a writer.

In support of the growing resistance movement, Havel commented on the efforts of other human rights groups in Czechoslovakia that fought for similar values as Charter 77. In the article “Testing Ground,” written for the London daily *The Independent*, he discusses a petition published in 1989 called “A Few Sentences.” The petition was reportedly signed by tens of thousands of people, showing how resistance had grown since the years that Havel first became a more active dissident. As Wilson notes in his introduction to “Testing Ground,” “A Few Sentences” was “a sign that the barriers between ‘dissidents’ and ‘ordinary people’ had begun to topple.”¹¹³ As people across the Eastern bloc began to actively participate in resistance movements, dissidence became the new norm. As Havel accurately points out in “Testing Ground,” “As fear of the police state dwindles, so does fear of dissidents.”¹¹⁴ Havel comments that there was proof for the coming revolution in Czechoslovakia, citing the demonstrations of 1988 and early 1989 as evidence of a push towards freedom.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Havel, *Open Letters*, 257.

¹¹³ Havel, *Open Letters*, 373.

¹¹⁴ Havel, *Open Letters*, 374.

¹¹⁵ Havel, *Open Letters*, 374.

Of “A Few Sentences” itself, Havel notes how many different types of people signed the petition, showing a unity among those fighting for freedom. However, the regime attempted to twist this fact by claiming the petition was a confrontation of the government, something that Havel acknowledges as a source of potential conflict in the future. From this impending conflict and revolution, Havel concludes that “Maybe this small—and, to some eyes, uninteresting—country will once more become a ‘testing ground’” for how to resist.¹¹⁶ Even at this point in time, Havel recognized how Czechoslovakia was soon positioned to make the transition from communism to democracy.

The Narrative of the Revolution

With a writer at the helm of the Velvet Revolution, Czechoslovaks began to understand their fight for freedom through narrative. James Krapfl asserts in his book *Revolution with a Human Face* that this thinking “enabled them to make sense of their experience and to influence how others interpreted what was happening. Narratives, in other words, were efforts to “fix the meaning of events as they unfolded.”¹¹⁷ Reshaping the rhetoric the people had been fed for decades was ultimately the key to dismantling the regime’s power.

On the 50th anniversary of International Students’ Day on November 17 of 1989, authorities violently suppressed a student demonstration. This incident is often considered the beginning of the Velvet Revolution. The government maintained that their interventions in peaceful protest were simply returning order to the chaos. To combat the story perpetuated the forces in power, the citizens of Czechoslovakia offered what Krapfl deems as “counternarrative”

¹¹⁶ Havel, *Open Letters*, 376.

¹¹⁷ James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 12, ProQuest Ebook Central.

and insisted that the authorities massacred innocent citizens.¹¹⁸ The people effectively rewrote events to match the truth. In doing so, they exposed the propaganda and built a new perception of their existence under communism.

Krapfl also argues that there was a certain theme of romanticism tied to the revolution.¹¹⁹ Czechoslovaks saw the Velvet Revolution as the people heroically fighting against all odds to create a better future. Havel expresses a similar sentiment in his political writing, and there is a sense of hope that permeates much of his work. However, Havel does make the distinction that the hope he thinks of is “a state of mind, not the state of the world.”¹²⁰ Having hope, to Havel, is “an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart” and must be accepted within an individual, not in society at large.¹²¹ Thus, individuals have the moral responsibility to cultivate hope and translate that into action. By acting morally and exerting what Havel refers to as “subtle pressure” on the regime, people could begin to break its power down.¹²²

When each individual chose to participate in demonstrations or strikes during the Velvet Revolution, this is exactly what they did. Dissidents chipped away at the rhetoric and ideology of the regime via nonviolent means. Following the events of November 17, hundreds of students gathered in Wenceslas Square to call for a students’ strike to start two days later and for a two-hour general workers’ strike the following week.¹²³ The concept of a two-hour strike might seem like a short amount of time, but Robert McCrae reflects on the “brilliance” of this particular idea, stating that it “might be just enough to attract real support from a timid people while sending an

¹¹⁸ Krapfl, *Revolution*, 12.

¹¹⁹ Krapfl, *Revolution*, 15.

¹²⁰ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 181.

¹²¹ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 181.

¹²² Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 183.

¹²³ Rob McCrae, *Resistance and Revolution: Václav Havel's Czechoslovakia* (MQUP, 1997), 108, ProQuest Ebook Central.

unmistakable signal to the regime.”¹²⁴ Essentially, the strike would have an economic impact enough for the government to start paying attention while being short enough that those who might be reluctant to participate would be willing to take part.

Following this meeting in Wenceslas Square and the establishment of an independent students’ council, a series of mostly student demonstrations gained traction on November 19. Once again, these protests struck back at the narrative the Communist Party perpetuated, and people rallied around anti-government slogans. An underground network passed along footage and photographs from the November 17 massacre to citizens.¹²⁵ By giving people tangible evidence of what actually occurred, the students’ council revealed the cracks in the government’s insistence that they were just reinstating order.

The Velvet Revolution also emulated the resistance movements of the 1970s, as shown by the establishment of the Civic Forum (of which Havel became the founder, leader, and spokesperson.) That same Sunday of student demonstration gave birth to a new group of dissidents. Havel’s idea for the Civic Forum was to have a place for all dissidents to meet underneath one “umbrella” and create unified objectives. The Civic Forum had significant connections to Charter 77. Both were places for people of different beliefs to come together and find ways to fight against the regime. Neither movement was intended to establish a new government following the regime’s collapse.

Naturally, this connection made Havel a good fit to be head of this initiative. The Civic Forum further modeled itself after Charter 77 by releasing a declaration. In contrast to Charter 77, the Civic Forum’s declaration was centered on particular events as opposed to general problems in communist society. The Civic Forum focused on the events of 1989 and denounced

¹²⁴ McRae, *Resistance and Revolution*, 108.

¹²⁵ McRae, *Resistance and Revolution*, 110.

the police brutality in response to student protests. Despite these minor differences, both movements still have significant connections that not only mirror one another, but also mirror the ideas behind Havel's writing: a call for justice and for moral action in the face of oppression.

A significant number of Havel's ideas from his political writing were implemented in the protestors' methods of resistance. The movement was pacifistic in nature, as the dissidents did not engage in violent tactics despite being met with force from the government. The sentiment of nonviolent resistance, while not always explicitly stated, runs throughout Havel's work when he advocates for more subtle means of resistance. In addition, the ideals of personal responsibility and morality were found throughout the Velvet Revolution. The people took it upon themselves to individually resist the regime in order to collectively make an impact. Furthermore, the importance of words made itself known during the Velvet Revolution, whether it was through anti-government slogans, student publications, or petitions. Some historians consider the Velvet Revolution to be about conversation, and that it was a movement where new methods and dialogues about society broke through the barriers of censorship;¹²⁶ Havel spent his career as a writer breaking through those barriers of censorship to fight for justice. Perhaps most importantly, Havel's influence represents that of the writer, as he redefines what it means to utilize the written word in times of social upheaval.

¹²⁶ Krapfl, *Revolution*, 76.

Chapter 4

The Writer's Choice

Some of Havel's importance as a writer undoubtedly derives from the way that the communist leadership treated those who expressed viewpoints contrary to their ideology. Throughout its history, the Soviet Union consistently painted artists as an enemy of the state and a source from which dissident ideas could form. The Soviet Union combatted the threat of writers the same way they would any other political enemy: by silencing and censoring them. Strict censorship over information, ideas, and writing, especially when it came to literature and the press, was a standard. When examining Havel, it is especially important to take this censorship into account and analyze how it made his writing more impactful. Without censorship, it is quite possible that Havel would not have held as much authority, and many of the tactics utilized in the Velvet Revolution would not have been so successful.

However, it is important to acknowledge that Havel's interpretation of the writer's place in resistance is not the only possible one. Milan Kundera is an important figure to examine in contrast to Havel. Not only did the two authors have different writing styles and criticisms, they also had separate approaches to the responsibility of a writer. Kundera began his career as part of the Communist Party and believed at one point in reform communism. However, he would later leave Czechoslovakia for good and denounce his Czech heritage. In direct contrast to Havel, Kundera did not stay to resist the regime; his actions demonstrate another option for writers under persecution, which was to escape. Kundera eventually came to understand the writer as a position of observation rather than action and argued later in life that writers should concern

themselves with portraying the world as it is, not as it should be. In conjunction with an examination of Soviet censorship, an analysis of Kundera's views and literary works provides a better understanding of how the writer functions under oppressive conditions.

Soviet Censorship

Under Soviet censorship, the act of writing took on a greater meaning. The government held a monopoly on information and silenced anyone who stepped outside of permissible ideology. This control over information meant that any writer who publicized such "anti-communist" views became more visible to both the government and the general public. By labeling the writer an enemy of the state, the regime effectively made the writer a hero of the people. Writers like Havel became moral authorities that people looked to for guidance on how to begin thinking critically and resisting. To fully understand how this shift of the writer to a position of authority occurred, it is necessary to examine the historical practice of censorship in the Soviet Union.

Just two days after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Lenin put into effect the Decree of the Press and effectively reinstated censorship in Russia.¹²⁷ From that decree onwards, censorship became the norm under communism, taking on many different forms and methods. Even with changing methods of censorship, the principles behind these practices remained the same. Written in 1989, the book *The Red Pencil* offers a variety of perspectives on the issue of Soviet censorship, including an account from the editor of a popular Soviet science journal, Leonid Vladimirov. Vladimirov argues that the "logic of Soviet censorship remains the same"

¹²⁷ Marianne Tax Choldin and Maurice Friedberg, eds., *The Red Pencil: Artists, Scholars, and Censors in the USSR* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 15.

even in 1989, and that “there is still no legitimate ground for the Communist Party rule in the Soviet Union, and this dangerous information must be strictly and continuously suppressed.”¹²⁸ Vladimirov’s assertion aligns with Havel’s views; Havel frequently argued that the regime sought to repress any critical thought that challenges their ideology because to acknowledge its flaws would be to destroy it. Vladimirov also describes how people worked in censors’ offices to ensure that no “state secrets” of any kind were found in the press or in printed works.¹²⁹ People who broke these rules of censorship were often threatened, fired from their jobs, or given warnings for offenses. In larger cases, people could be sentenced to death for anti-state activity.

A study conducted by Harold Swayze on the censorship of Soviet literature from 1946 to 1959 argues that the principles behind ideological control tie back to the writings of Marx and Engels. Swayze draws upon Marx and Engels’s idea that history is defined by class conflicts and proposes that Soviet government took the stance that “political, philosophical, religious ideologies reflect and serve the interests of the social classes which adhere to them.”¹³⁰ In other words, ideologies only bolstered an unjust class system. This justification directly contradicts what Vladimirov, Havel, and other prominent thinkers posited as the true reason for censorship, which was to maintain power. The use of Marxist arguments to support censorship could be viewed as a cover for more insidious and controlling purposes. Swayze also states that the presentation of realities outside the Soviet Union was perceived as a potential danger. Therefore, “it is to avoid such dangers that the Soviet regime has elaborated a literary doctrine and

¹²⁸ Choldin and Friedberg, *The Red Pencil*, 17.

¹²⁹ Choldin and Friedberg, *The Red Pencil*, 18.

¹³⁰ Harold Swayze, *Political Control of Literature in the USSR, 1946-1959* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 3.

developed practical devices to confine imagination and creativeness within specified compartments.”¹³¹ These “practical devices” took the form of censorship.

Although censorship in the Soviet Union had its roots in the era directly after the Bolshevik Revolution, it became stricter in following decades. In the 1930s and 1940s, censorship in the Soviet Union “intensified and spread over some areas previously unaffected or only slightly touched by it.”¹³² The leaders of the Stalinist era conducted a series of purges designed to rid society of any class enemies and political opponents. In April of 1932, the government formed a singular Union of Soviet Writers designed so that the Communist Party could “achieve the tightest control over the entire literary profession by putting all loyal writers—proletarians and fellow travelers—in the one organization with a Communist faction at its core.”¹³³ Certain books and pieces of writing were also banned from publication, a trend that would continue throughout the Soviet Union’s history. Monitoring who could write and what could be written about ensured that public discourse would serve only to bolster the regime. Anything written outside of that purpose was to be suppressed.

In 1946, on the heels of World War II, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued the Zhdanov Doctrine, which attempted to reclaim the concepts of Soviet cultural identity. The doctrine asserted that only two factions existed in the world: an “imperialistic” group made up of the United States and the other Western powers versus a “democratic” group represented by the Soviet Union. The doctrine impacted artists, writers, and other intellectuals, who were expected to adhere to socialist ideas and the party line to promote the interests of the “democratic” Soviet group. In April of 1946, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, a Russian political

¹³¹ Swayze, *Political Control*, 25.

¹³² Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature, 1917-1991* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 51.

¹³³ Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet*, 53.

newspaper, published an editorial that detailed certain goals that Soviet literature needed to achieve: “to counteract the false ideals and prejudices of the ‘capitalist reaction,’ that Soviet literature ‘must convince the reader of the advantages of the Soviet social order, to counterbalance the lies and slander of our enemies.’”¹³⁴ Works of literature were expected to “neutralize the favorable impression of life abroad” in countries like the United States.¹³⁵

Some historians consider the time period directly after World War II to be the peak of Soviet censorship. As an example, *Bruski*, a book written about peasant life in early Soviet Russia, was edited and reprinted in 1947 with around 371 revisions. The novel was corrected so as to “rehabilitate prerevolutionary Russia and the peasants, to play down failures of communes and collective farms, to elevate the Party leaders, and to humiliate their real and imagined enemies.”¹³⁶ Other reprints of books received similar treatments and were altered to conform to the Party’s agenda.

Following the periods of strictest censorship came a temporary thaw during the 1960s, allowing for slightly more freedom in terms of written works and creative endeavors. As was the case with Prague Spring, this period of relaxed censorship gave birth to a number of important works of literature and other types of art. However, censorship tightened up once more in the decades leading up to the revolutions of 1989. The Communist Party under Brezhnev’s leadership added an article to the Soviet Criminal Code that “stipulated a fine, forced labor, or imprisonment for oral, written, or printed dissemination of ‘deliberate fabrications slandering the Soviet social and state system.’”¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Swayze, *Political Control*, 33.

¹³⁵ Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet*, 99.

¹³⁶ Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet*, 104.

¹³⁷ Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet*, 182.

The official enforcement of censorship led to the development of a network of dissidents that resisted through the use of rhetoric and the written word. These dissidents fought to take back control of information that had been taken and used against them in order to maintain power. Written in 1985, Donald Shanor's *Behind the Lines* looks at methods of Soviet censorship and how people resisted through unofficial networks outside the official media. He introduces the concept of the underground telegraph, which he describes as "an information system that competes with the official media, correcting, supplementing, and often contradicting what they have to say."¹³⁸ People would listen to foreign broadcasts to obtain information withheld from them by the regime and would then spread this information illegally through the underground telegraph. Most of this activity was conducted via word of mouth, but sometimes took written and taped forms. Shanor clarifies that most people in the underground telegraph were not openly dissidents, and many participated simply because they wanted to know about what was going on at home and abroad; however, he also states that all dissidents were part of this telegraph.¹³⁹ In particular, suppliers of illegal news were considered dissidents since the risk for them was much greater. This group of people made up part of a larger network of dissidents that formed alongside the underground telegraph.

Shanor notes that a key difference between the two "networks" was the greater presence of written material and records of dissident activity, which were used against many of them during trials and arrests.¹⁴⁰ According to Shanor, while dissidents were not as effective at spreading information through the underground telegraph, they did have a strong impact in terms

¹³⁸ Donald R. Shanor, *Behind the Lines: The Private War Against Soviet Censorship* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 80.

¹³⁹ Shanor, *Behind the Lines*, 109.

¹⁴⁰ Shanor, *Behind the Lines*, 110.

of creating “an independent public opinion in the Soviet Union for the first time.”¹⁴¹ These two networks contributed to the role of the writer in such oppressive circumstances. Writers who chose to publicize their views became part of the larger dissident network and were more of a target for the regime.

The Writer’s Choice: Kundera vs. Havel

When considering the question of whether or not a writer has a responsibility to resist, Havel and Kundera exemplify the two sides of the debate. Havel stayed in communist Czechoslovakia, stating in “I Take the Side of Truth” that he is, “a writer, writing what I want to write...if I get involved in any other way except by my writing, then only because I feel this to be my natural human and civic duty, as well as my duty as a writer.”¹⁴² Havel saw his position of a writer as one of moral authority and that it was his obligation to do what he could to achieve freedom for the people.

Kundera, on the other hand, went through a transformation in views that led to both his exile and to him seeing the writer as more of an observer to society than an active participant in change. As a former member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Kundera was very politically active before his exile. His first disillusionment with communism was when he was kicked out in 1950 for “anti-party activities” and criticizing its totalitarian nature; this incident would become the focus of his novel *The Joke*, in which a young man is expelled from the Communist Party for a humorous remark. Kundera was readmitted to the party in 1956. He then became a supporter of Prague Spring during the 1960s and defended reform communism,

¹⁴¹ Shanor, *Behind the Lines*, 111.

¹⁴² Havel, *Open Letters*, 247.

clashing with Havel in public essays. Eventually, Kundera became completely disillusioned with the concept of fixing communism and moved to France in 1975, where he withdrew from Czechoslovak politics. In 1979, Kundera had his Czechoslovak citizenship revoked and has been a French citizen since 1981. Today, he considers himself a French author, insisting that his works be read as such.

Kundera's biography is an important contrast to Havel's life as a political dissident. Both were significant and well-known Czech writers that utilized the written word as a tool with which to take a political stance. However, the two men held differing political views during their time in Czechoslovakia, particularly when Kundera was part of the Communist Party in the 1960s and early 1970s. During this decade, the two writers operated on different levels of thinking. Havel's writing at the time concerned itself with universal human issues and principles that should guide people. Kundera, on the other hand, tended to place importance on locality. In his early writing, he explored the Czechoslovak experience and what it meant to be a part of a small nation. These ideas are particularly developed in his depiction of the Czechoslovak socialist state in *The Joke*.

Havel and Kundera even clashed in public on a couple of occasions, exemplifying their differing beliefs on writing, politics, and resistance. A retrospective article published in *Radio Free Europe* following Havel's death in late 2011 tracks the debate between Kundera and Havel on the fate of small countries like Czechoslovakia. After the military invasion during Prague Spring, the two engaged in an intellectual battle over how to respond to such a shocking event. Kundera published an essay in 1968 called "The Czech Lot" that took a more hopeful tone than his later writings would adopt. In the essay, Kundera suggests that being a small state like Czechoslovakia created certain limitations, but there is still reason to hope as long as people

continue to strive for the ideals of Prague Spring. This essay embodies Kundera's earlier tendencies to think about Czech politics on a national level. Havel responded in 1969 with an article titled "The Czech Lot?" that disagreed with the notion of a "Czech lot" and that "we ourselves are the masters of our fate; we will not be freed from this by pleading selfishness nor by hiding behind our geographic position."¹⁴³ Havel writes based on an assumption of universality, or that human societies should all be operating under the same principles. To Havel, even if a nation is small, they can—and should—take control of their own future.

Based on Kundera's experience of being kicked out of the Communist Party, his 1967 novel *The Joke* follows four different perspectives after the fallout of a joke deemed "anti-communist." The character of Ludvik represents Kundera during his time as a communist. According to the narration, Ludvik was a young member of the Party and was "earnest, enthusiastic, and committed" at meetings.¹⁴⁴ However, when he makes a joke in a letter to a woman named Marketa, the party decides he is making an anti-communist statement. Ludvik is removed from the Communist Party, banned from resuming his studies, and called into military service. Ludvik's fall from faithful member of the Communist Party to traitor reflects the experience of living under communist Czechoslovakia. In this scenario, the system controls even humorous remarks made in seemingly private correspondences. Ludvik's character arc highlights the ways in which citizens were expected to conform to a strict ideology. The fact that Communist Party felt the need to censor a simple joke also reflects the vulnerabilities of the system.

¹⁴³ Benjamin Herman, "The Debate That Won't Die: Havel and Kundera on Whether Protest Is Worthwhile," *Radio Free Europe*, January 11, 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 33.

After his downfall, Ludvik ultimately concludes that there are forces greater than him controlling the events of the world, as he reflects, “the fault lay elsewhere and was so great that its shadow had fallen far and wide, on the whole world of innocent things (and words), and was devastating them.”¹⁴⁵ This conclusion connects to “The Czech Lot,” in which Kundera argues that as a small nation living under communist control, Czechoslovakia has been ascribed a certain fate. The idea of greater forces at work hints at the nature of communist leadership and their control over every aspect of its citizens’ lives.

Kundera’s life and the progression of his written works also represent an alternate ending to the story of the dissident writer. While Havel stayed to resist, even through multiple arrests, Kundera escaped to a democratic country and has lived there ever since. His exile begs the question: was it better for a writer to stay and try to enact change, or to escape in the hopes of a better life elsewhere in case the totalitarian system never falls? More specifically, did Kundera have a responsibility as a writer to fight injustices? While Havel might answer the latter question with a resounding “yes,” it does not seem as clear-cut when examining the views, writings, and actions of Kundera.

A sense of futility in fighting such a powerful and ever-present regime is present in many of Kundera’s later novels and essays. With these works, he explored more universal themes in favor of national ones. One of his most famous novels, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, grapples with the essence of human nature and what it really means to exist and make choices in a world that often seems to have no meaning. Throughout *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera actively refutes Nietzsche’s idea of “eternal return,” which proposes that events will occur an infinite number of times in different universes. Kundera argues instead that human life

¹⁴⁵ Kundera, *The Joke*, 313.

exists only once and will never happen again in any timeline, meaning that, “a life which does not return is like a shadow, without weight.”¹⁴⁶ Following this logic, any choices that people make ultimately mean nothing and create a “lightness” of being that weighs on the human experience.

This central idea reveals that the novel is ultimately a retrospective piece. Kundera wrote *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in 1984 after he gained French citizenship and lost Czechoslovak citizenship. Kundera’s previous support of reform communism and the Prague Spring meant that the resulting military invasion could have had a greater impact on him. He wrote the novel before the Velvet Revolution and the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia, so he only had his own failed experiences and his exile as a reference for his viewpoints. Thus, it stands to reason that a sense of futility towards resistance could emerge. At one point in the novel, Kundera writes that “Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes of Central Europe are exclusively the work of criminals is overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were not made by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the road to paradise.”¹⁴⁷ This quote reflects Kundera’s own former beliefs and membership in the Communist Party. He is acknowledging his hand in supporting the regime, as well as alluding to his later disillusionment.

The novel also reflects an inability to escape a person’s homeland, much in the same way Kundera has been unable to do so in his own life. In the middle of the novel, the central characters Tomas and Tereza escape to Zurich in Switzerland. However, Tereza quickly finds herself drawn back to Prague, and Tomas eventually comes to join her. After their return to Prague, Tomas is fired for his refusal to denounce an anti-communist article he wrote. At the same time, the dissidents want him to join their cause, but Tomas refuses to sign one of their

¹⁴⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 3.

¹⁴⁷ Kundera, *The Unbearable*, 176.

petitions. Kundera later muses: “Is it better to shout and thereby hasten the end, or to keep silent and gain thereby a slower death? Is there any answer to these questions?”¹⁴⁸ Here, Kundera tells the reader that is perhaps useless to take any side under such a system, as both options lead to the same result—continued oppression. Therefore, fighting the regime is futile and leads to the same conclusion whether or not you support the resistance. Tomas and Tereza never manage to leave again after their return from Switzerland and end up dying in the Czech countryside, showing that there is no true way to be free from the past.

Havel directly refutes Kundera’s assumption that civic actions and nonviolent means of protest are not effective and even addressed it in *Disturbing the Peace*: “I am quite familiar with Kundera’s skepticism regarding civic actions that have no immediate hope of being effective, and which therefore may appear to be no more than an attempt by their authors to show how wonderful they are, and I do not share that skepticism.”¹⁴⁹ Havel supported the creation of petitions and public protests, and he remarked that he was a signatory of the petition Kundera alluded to in his novel. Although the petition was received harshly by the Communist Party, Havel argued that it helped to “renew the broken solidarity” among dissidents.¹⁵⁰ So, while the petition it did not result in any significant political change, it did raise the spirits of the dissidents and give them greater drive to keep fighting.

Ultimately, Havel saw his platform as a writer as a means to express ways to resist. People looked to Havel to determine the ways that they could resist and what kinds of civic actions they could take. He also believed that it was his duty specifically as a writer to resist and

¹⁴⁸ Kundera, *The Unbearable*, 222.

¹⁴⁹ Kundera, *The Unbearable*, 173.

¹⁵⁰ Havel and Hviždala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 175.

criticize communism. His vision, as expressed in writing, brought a sharper focus to the revolution and reflected the power of communication.

In contrast, Kundera's disillusionment with the Communist Party and subsequent exile resulted in a belief that fighting oppression was futile, a sentiment expressed in his later works. Kundera came to believe in a separation between the art created by writers and reality. In a 1993 essay called "Testaments Betrayed," Kundera states that the novel is "a realm where moral judgment is suspended."¹⁵¹ Kundera makes it clear that he viewed his position as a novelist such that he would "rule out identification with any politics, any religion, any ideology, any moral doctrine, any group."¹⁵² In Kundera's view, the writer should not adopt political stances or use their writing as a tool to pass moral judgments. Rather, art should reflect reality in a nonjudgmental manner.

However, Kundera acknowledges in the essay that art and history are connected and that "Nothing seems to me worse for art than to fall outside its own history."¹⁵³ So it appears that the two writers are in agreement over the idea that art and history are inextricably linked. Writers have a part in capturing the legacy of a particular time, place, or movement for the people. While Havel and Kundera disagree on a lot of fundamental levels in their writing and viewpoints, they are both important contributors to the history of Czech literature and of the country itself. Their writing managed to articulate a vision that represented their time period and the conditions they lived under.

Furthermore, the two writers represent the options available to dissidents: escape the oppression or fight it. This choice to leave or to stay reflects the larger one that all writers face as

¹⁵¹ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (n.p.: HarperCollins, 1995), 7.

¹⁵² Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 158.

¹⁵³ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 18.

well when shaping their role in resistance. Kundera's departure to France and refusal to believe in the writer as a person of moral authority meant that his conception of what it meant to be a writer was fundamentally different from Havel's. While Havel stayed to enact a legacy beyond his writing by entering politics, Kundera allowed for his writing to speak as a product of resistance on its own merits. Essentially, while Kundera's criticisms of totalitarianism lie solely in the pieces of writing themselves, Havel's ideals extend beyond the page and into concrete action. Thus, Havel left a greater legacy in terms of direct impact of the revolution, while Kundera's work provides a retrospective position from which to view Czechoslovakia under communism.

Chapter 5

A Writer in Office

The Communist Party dominated Czechoslovakia for a little over forty years by the time of its dissolution in 1989. Prior to that, Czechoslovakia had been under Nazi dictatorship. To transition from a system that was so entrenched in its citizens lives to a more democratic form of government—the likes of which Czechoslovakia had not seen for many years—would have been challenging for anyone, much less for a playwright. As Havel discovered during his presidency, the reality of being a dissident and resisting oppression is much different than the reality of establishing a new government after a regime's demise.

Havel's time as president is a significant period in the history of the Czech people. The country faced a transition into a capitalist and democratic society. Since opposing political views could not be expressed freely in the decades prior, dissidents were able to unify under one banner of anticommunist resistance despite personal differences in values, beliefs and visions. After the regime's fall, these differences became more apparent, creating additional obstacles for the new government to bring about desired democratic change.

In his writing, Havel argues in favor of universal ideals and presents a high moral vision. Many of these ideals were put to the test during his time in office. Did he experience any disillusionment with the political process? Did the Czech people become disillusioned with him? These same questions could also be applied to the other important figures and dissidents that brought down communist regimes in Europe. Havel's presidency offers an important chance to reexamine the writer's role during particularly turbulent periods. Do writers better serve the

common good as tools of resistance in times of crisis? Or can their role be extended beyond a revolution's conclusion into political office?

Transitioning to Democracy

During this period of uncertainty and state building, many people prominently involved in the revolution, who expressed ideals that the nation wished to see after the fall of communism, rose to positions of political power. As a result, people who had no political experience besides their conceptions of what a free society should look like took responsibility for reshaping Czech society. However, they did not lead entirely without guidance or a tradition to draw upon. Robin Shepherd argues that the interwar period in Czechoslovakia, when Masaryk became president, “served as a reminder to Czechoslovak, and above all Czech, citizens that the standards they now aspired to had once been achieved before.”¹⁵⁴ Shepard claims this example illustrated the reinstatement of Czech national heritage and a return to a period of political stability. The influence of the Masaryk era was a subtle ideological guide nonetheless, offering an interpretation of liberal democracy that could be used as a reference after years of an oppressive regime.

Czechoslovakia's first free election since the Communist Party took over after World War II occurred in 1990, marking the beginning of their move to a democratic system. The newly elected officials came mostly from the Civic Forum and the Slovak organization Public Against Violence. Most had been leaders during the Velvet Revolution and stood out as notable

¹⁵⁴ Shepherd, *Czechoslovakia*, 55.

figures of resistance. Havel was appointed president by the Federal Assembly following the government's collapse in 1989 and retained his presidency through reelection.

Under communism, Czechoslovaks were not allowed to advance their own stake in politics or pursue ideas outside the regime's agenda. Free elections and the process of democratization represented liberation for Czechoslovakia, but it also ushered in an era of political parties and infighting among different groups vying for power. Freedom of expression allowed political interests to flourish and splinter groups to form from the Civic Forum. Some resistance groups formed their own parties. Before the revolution, there was a sense that these dissident political groups were all fighting for the same cause—this notion of unity quickly disappeared in the Velvet Revolution's aftermath.

The new leaders also needed to distance themselves from communism and the regime's legacy. Tina Rosenberg argues that "communism's lack of an independent legislatures, judiciaries, regulatory agencies, or press has also hobbled reformers trying to build Western-style democracies."¹⁵⁵ Essentially, there were few leaders who had real experience to draw from, and many of the old institutions were still in place. It was even more challenging to craft a new government with its own institutions when the splintering of political parties made it difficult to get a majority in parliament. Not only that, but Havel would not label himself as part of any political party, meaning that no one party had a clear advantage over the other. Havel's refusal to align with one party's agenda impacted the ability of a single group to hold a majority, since they lacked the president's backing.¹⁵⁶ This contributed to the overall political instability of the party system.

¹⁵⁵ Tina Rosenberg, "The Unfinished Revolution of 1989," *Foreign Policy* 115 (Summer 1999): 93, ProQuest.

¹⁵⁶ Shepherd, *Czechoslovakia*, 68.

The financial difficulties of transitioning from a communist, planned economy to a capitalist, free market economy also became apparent after 1989. Rosenberg mentions that the Soviet satellite countries adopted the West's model of democracy and capitalism as an ideal to strive for, and used it to make comparisons to the conditions in which they lived in. Contrary to expectations, these countries "emerged from communism shocked to find that many of the claims their governments had made about capitalism were in fact true—the crime, poverty, and drug addiction of capitalist societies were not merely propaganda,"¹⁵⁷ which added to general despair and impatience. Czechoslovakia now had to deal with the consequences of capitalism's shortcomings and injustices. Essentially, they swapped out one set of economic issues for another and had to contend with that reality. By the end of the first decade out of communism, the economy was experiencing a recession and market fluctuations. As a result, unemployment and rates of inequality were rising.¹⁵⁸

These realities contrasted with how people anticipated their lives would be after the dissolution of the Communist Party. As Rosenberg puts it, they "believed that once it was chipped away, Western-style capitalism and democracy would emerge gleaming from beneath."¹⁵⁹ They expected that removing the oppressive power would result in an immediate transition to a better society without the injustices they previously endured. However, the former Soviet satellite countries ended up embracing the "excesses" of capitalism, such as consumerism, without its "foundation of respect for civil rights and the rule of law."¹⁶⁰ The emphasis on civil rights was particularly important to the people, as that was one of the aspects of democracy that

¹⁵⁷ Rosenberg, "The Unfinished," 92.

¹⁵⁸ Shepherd, *Czechoslovakia*, 75.

¹⁵⁹ Rosenberg, "The Unfinished," 92.

¹⁶⁰ Rosenberg, "The Unfinished," 92.

they fought for during the Velvet Revolution. As a result of a growing disconnect, people lost trust in their government as the decade wore on. Shepherd cites an opinion poll in 1998 that “suggested that three-quarters of Czech citizens believed there was a lot of corruption among public officials and one in four believed that almost all politicians and clerks were corrupt.”¹⁶¹ This poll reflects a perception that not much had really changed since the fall of the regime.

Czechoslovakia faced a complicated political transition on several levels. First, they had to wrestle with a fracturing political party system that created disunity among leaders. In addition, moving to a market economy meant contending with the problems associated with capitalism. Finally, the new leaders had to take into account the wants and needs of the Czechoslovak people, who started to lose faith in them throughout the 1990s. These obstacles created a test of political leadership abilities among dissidents-turned-politicians, including Havel.

From Dissident to Leader: Ideas and Realities

Armed with only their ideals and little practical political experience, the new leaders set out to establish a post-communist society with democratic institutions, a capitalist economy, and greater civil rights for the people. Many of the dissidents, including Havel himself, found upholding their beliefs to be difficult. They often ruminated on the nature of resisting with ideals versus enacting their visions and the compromises this inevitably called for.

In *Living in Freedom*, Mark Sommer details three trips he took to Czechoslovakia during the Velvet Revolution and the years immediately following. He interviewed a variety of people

¹⁶¹ Shepherd, *Czechoslovakia*, 104.

on their newfound freedom and the direction that Czechoslovakia was taking as a nation. On his trip in the spring of 1991, he interviewed Rudolf Batek, a man who spent nine and a half years in prison for dissident activity. Batek was one of the first signatories of Charter 77 and helped found VONS, or the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Persecuted. He continued sharpening his ideals while he was in prison and stated that he “formulated [his] philosophical life concept” through writing while imprisoned.¹⁶² He resisted the regime even after being released. After the revolution, he became one of the newly elected members of the Federal Assembly. In his interview with Sommer, he describes the difficulties of transitioning from dissident to political leader as such: “Now I must act not only as an individual but as a president of the Chamber of Peoples.”¹⁶³ People who were inclined towards dissident activity faced these same realities of holding political office and felt this type of pressure Batek describes. When Sommer suggests that people who are “by nature dissidents” are perhaps not “suited to exercising official power,” Batek agrees and says that, “none of us is suitable for such political power functions.”¹⁶⁴

Batek’s response suggests that there existed a disconnect between the abilities of an effective dissident and the abilities of an effective political leader. While the dissidents were able to formulate intellectual arguments against oppression and organizing resistance, those talents did not necessarily transition to handling day-to-day political matters. Many of them had never held an official position in government. The Velvet Revolution was deeply rooted in intellectualism, rhetoric, and scholarly arguments; success in an intellectual sphere suggests these people were perhaps more theoretically than practically oriented.

¹⁶² Mark Sommer, *Living in Freedom: The Exhilaration and Anguish of Prague's Second Spring* (San Francisco, CA: Mercury House, 1992), 143.

¹⁶³ Sommer, *Living in Freedom*, 145.

¹⁶⁴ Sommer, *Living in Freedom*, 145.

Other Eastern European dissidents-turned-politicians echoed similar sentiments about the difficulties of establishing a new regime. In an interview with Václav Benda, the cofounder of the Christian Democratic Party in Czechoslovakia, Benda reveals what it is like to be a dissident who became active in party politics. Although it was difficult to transition from having a single party of resistance to having many opposing political factions, Benda argues that this shift was necessary after 1989: “We need to renew our social and political life; and to renew our political life, to let democracy really start working, we need to renew pluralism, and learn to develop different political opinions.”¹⁶⁵

The balance between polarization and healthy political debate can be tricky to achieve; Benda acknowledges these difficulties. When asked what he thought blocked the road to democracy, Benda replied the “threat that is totalitarianism is far from defeated.” Although his fellow dissidents were the ones now in power, he said, “the old structures [may be] swallowing them up before we manage to destroy them. These new people could begin to see things through the eyes of the old structures.”¹⁶⁶ There was a legitimate concern for both Benda and the general public that the new leaders would not stick to their ideals and that elements of totalitarianism might begin to creep into society again.

Havel felt the same disconnect that Batek and Benda describe. Throughout his presidency, Havel experienced a measure of disillusionment when it came to his ideals. In his New Year’s Address, which was his first public address as president delivered in January 1990, Havel showed he was still committed to enacting moral change in society. He said that while there were still economic and governmental issues plaguing Czechoslovakia, “the worst thing is

¹⁶⁵ Whipple, *After the Velvet*, 193.

¹⁶⁶ Whipple, *After the Velvet*, 196.

that we live in a contaminated moral environment. We fell morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought.”¹⁶⁷ In the New Year’s Address, he reiterated the necessity of building up morals of honesty, individual responsibility, and civic duty.

Later, Havel remained committed to these moral principles but acknowledged the difficulties of seeing his ideals realized. Havel’s *Summer Meditations*, written when he was still in office, reflects how his viewpoints changed after being elected president. In the opening of *Summer Meditations*, Havel remarks that, “The era of enthusiasm, unity, mutual understanding, and dedication to a common cause is over.”¹⁶⁸ During the decades of dissidence, especially at the Velvet Revolution’s peak, participants put aside political differences they may have had.

Unity was also due in part to censorship, which made it impossible for people to truly develop discourse on specific issues, form separate political parties, or cultivate distinct political orientations. A sudden release from the forces silencing people meant that criticism of the government and uncontrolled partisanship were rife after 1989. Havel writes in “Politics, Morality, and Civility” that “Citizens are becoming more and more disgusted with all this, and their disgust is understandably directed against the democratic government they themselves elected.”¹⁶⁹ However, despite acknowledging changes in the social and political environment, Havel still urged people to let morals guide their political actions. Instead of focusing on competition with those of differing political opinions, people needed to care for one another and promote a more just, compassionate, and equitable society. This argument is in line with Havel’s writing as a dissident. He continued to maintain a version of politics that was “simply a matter of

¹⁶⁷ Havel, *Open Letters*, 391.

¹⁶⁸ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, xvii.

¹⁶⁹ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, 3.

serving those around us...Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility, expressed through action.”¹⁷⁰ In this essay, Havel claims his political decisions as president are guided by a moral obligation to stand by his ideals to serve the people.

However, Havel details that being in office is largely about expressing your opinion in a way that does not create a hostile environment by knowing the bounds of appropriateness. According to Havel, a good political leader needs to have a sense of the time period and its people, and examine what they want from their government; a leader needs to know what the “nature of their worries” really is.¹⁷¹ So, above all, Havel learned that it is not just about upholding one’s ideals but also about accurately perceiving what people desire from their leadership. He discovered that governing involves a certain amount of compromise in order to create a diplomatic and productive environment.

Havel’s description of an effective political leader is one who understands the “mood of the people” and has a “certain instinct for the time.”¹⁷² This view contrasts with growing public discontent with his leadership throughout the decade. Shepherd mentions that Havel’s ratings in the polls started to turn against him as the 1990s came to a close, and “the moral stature which had always outweighed his formal powers was on the wane.”¹⁷³ Havel felt “the demands of his office” and the pressure from the public to enact the ideals he had fought for in the revolution. However, his ability to articulate models of morality did not translate into political leadership that yielded swift change. This was frustrating for both Havel and for the people he was meant to serve.

¹⁷⁰ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, 6.

¹⁷¹ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, 11.

¹⁷² Havel, *Summer Meditations*, 11.

¹⁷³ Shepherd, *Czechoslovakia*, 39.

Essentially, Havel's moral authority that he had acquired as a writer and leader of the Velvet Revolution did not lend itself to holding political office in the long term. John Keane takes a more negative view of his presidency, painting his rise and fall in the public eye as a "political tragedy." Keane points out that there were a number of people in the Federal Assembly who worried about Havel standing in the way of the very ideals he had fought for, a "feeling [that] was strengthened by Havel's tendency to describe himself, in self-important terms, the voice of Being, as 'an instrument of the time' who was being compelled 'to do what had to be done.'"¹⁷⁴ Zdeněk Jičínský, a prominent constitutional lawyer, was a vocal critic of Havel's political tactics and would later go on to say, "Havel's personality was that of an artist, a dramatist. He had no grasp of political science, no legal background, and only limited familiarity with the constitutional relationship in which he was acting."¹⁷⁵ The testimonies gathered by Keane show that Havel's lack of political experience proved to be a detriment to his ability to lead.

The growing tensions between Havel and other members of the parliament were rooted in the dispute between the Czechs and the Slovaks. Initially, the conflict started over what to name the new country. Havel pushed for the Czechoslovak Republic, an echo of the postwar democratic period. As anticipated by some, "the problem of the relative 'invisibility' of Slovakia instantly surfaced" and Slovak leaders wanted the new name to reflect "the fact that Slovakia was also a republic."¹⁷⁶ This incident jumpstarted a debate known as the "hyphen war," in which politicians on both sides argued over the placement of a hyphen in the name. The hyphen was meant to indicate a sense of equality between the two groups. Underneath the surface, however, the debate masked the growing Slovak resentment at not being treated as equals.

¹⁷⁴ John Keane, *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 420.

¹⁷⁵ Keane, *Václav Havel*, 422.

¹⁷⁶ Keane, *Václav Havel*, 419.

Havel expressed disagreement with the idea of Slovakia splitting from the country. He wrote, “If the country were to divide, this complex and elaborately constructed fabric—the work of decades—would immediately unravel.”¹⁷⁷ Havel’s argument was that Czechoslovakia had existed since 1918 and created its own national and cultural identity; to have Slovakia leave would be to destroy that identity. He also noted economic difficulties that would occur if the two groups separated into different states. However, a name signifying equality was not enough to keep the two nationalities together. The Slovaks voted to split to form their own country in 1992, and this became known as the “Velvet Divorce.” The separation impacted Havel’s views of his own presidency, as the split was clearly something that he did not wish to have happen under his leadership. However, the leaders of post-communist Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic still held a sense of hope regarding the economic, political, ideological, and social future of their country. Much of Havel’s writing during and after his presidency retained an emphasis on the ideals of moral responsibility that he became so famous for before the revolution. However, people’s perceptions of Havel after the revolution were increasingly negative.

Another dissident-turned-politician who managed to maintain a sense of hope throughout this period was Václav Klaus, the second president following Havel. Klaus had been heavily involved in the politics of the new democracy prior to his presidency. As an economist, he maintained a belief in the importance of cultivating a free market economy in relation to politics. In a piece titled “Why Am I Optimistic?” Klaus asserts that despite the realities of post-communist life settling into the country’s morale, he remains hopeful for their future. He states that his optimism “springs from [his] belief in the wealth of [his] country: the wisdom, skill,

¹⁷⁷ Havel, *Summer Meditations*, 35.

capacity for action and adaptability of fifteen million Czechoslovak citizens.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, he argues that the new government will never obtain as much as power as the communists had over the people, and that is in part attributable to the economic market.

In a series of Klaus’ essays and speeches, entitled *Renaissance*, he further establishes his faith and confidence in the transition process. He states, “that the Czech Republic has already crossed the Rubicon dividing the old and the new regimes...we may become proof that the transformation from communism to a free society can be reached.”¹⁷⁹ However, it is worth noting that Klaus has the advantage of hindsight in composing these essays and speeches. Overall, though, Klaus’s optimism signals that not every dissident that became a political leader felt frustration or experienced difficulty in making the jump to leadership.

While Havel had great success in achieving authority as a moral figure and a writer in the years before the revolution, he struggled to maintain authority when elected to office. His abilities were better suited to unifying people in the name of resistance, as he was more effectively able to detail his vision of the world than he was able to properly realize that vision in concrete political action. Havel also had to learn the art of compromising on his ideals in order to achieve progress. For Havel, his role as a leader of nonviolent resistance and as a prominent writer ultimately defines his legacy more than his time in political office does.

¹⁷⁸ Whipple, *After the Velvet*, 167.

¹⁷⁹ Václav Klaus, *Renaissance: The Rebirth of Liberty in the Heart of Europe* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1997), 7.

Chapter 6 A Word on Words

Under communism, Eastern Europe experienced decades of oppression, censorship, and state control. The countries in the Soviet Bloc lived through the rule of a government that legitimized its power through rhetoric and ideology as they systematically exiled and silenced any criticism. It is under these conditions that a writer like Havel came to play a vital role in resistance.

Havel separated himself from the regime's ideology by using words to not only express a contradictory worldview—one where people could break the power of an oppressive government simply by refusing to believe in its rhetoric—but also to call people to action. His political writing provided a model for those seeking to resist. As a result of his essays, Havel went from a playwright to a significant political figure throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By the time of the Velvet Revolution, he emerged as one of the country's leaders and became the first president of post-communist Czechoslovakia. His journey reflects the larger importance of the written word in resisting oppression.

However, the appointment of Havel and other dissidents to positions of political leadership following the fall of communism in Eastern Europe begs the question: what is the role of writers in these revolutions? Are writers only meant to be tools of resistance by providing moral leadership prior to and during a revolution, or are they responsible for upholding their ideals through political leadership afterwards? Do they have a responsibility to realize their

ideals by building a new nation, or are their contributions better oriented towards art and critical commentary?

Through an analysis of the Velvet Revolution, the decades leading up to it, and its aftermath, the writer's role is shown to be key during times of crisis or extreme oppression. In the case of Czechoslovakia, Havel was much more effective at conveying his vision and calling people to action in the years leading up to the revolution. The time when his writing was the most impactful was during periods of extreme oppression because it was at these moments that it was more urgent for the people to hear other perspectives.

A writer's work is always going to be a product of its time period and historical context. Therefore, a body of work will be understood in terms of the confines of the time in which it was produced and published. Havel wrote his most influential pieces when censorship was at its strongest, and the Communist Party ideology was the most rigorously enforced. There was an element of personal risk involved in Havel's decision to write and voice his thoughts, adding to the power of his words; his expression of subversive viewpoints gave those words more weight. When writers are no longer censored and free to express their ideas at will, as is the case in most democracies, it creates an "oversaturation" effect that can make their writing less powerful and influential in enacting societal change. When people have access to multiple different viewpoints and sources of information, writers are less likely to achieve the same moral standing as Havel did. Writers became powerful as a result of their unique ability to criticize the oppression of thought.

In addition, the importance of location when measuring a writer's contribution cannot be discounted. Writers experienced a greater degree of authority in Eastern Europe during the Soviet Union's domination precisely because the government was committed to silencing critical

discourse. Even if a writer rejects their contributions to a specific country, they can still have an impact if the circumstances allow for it. Milan Kundera considers himself a French writer and insists that his work be classified as such.¹⁸⁰ In doing so, he completely rejects his heritage as well as discredits the themes in his novels and essays that deal with Czech nationality and the struggles of being a small nation. Despite his self-description as a French writer, Kundera is still praised as one of the best Czech writers in history and had an undeniable impact on earlier resistance activity, particularly during the Prague Spring. His exile to France and subsequent disowning of his Czech past did not manage to divorce his work from its original context, importance, and audience. To this day, he is more popular and well known among Czechs than he is among the French.

Given all of these factors, the writer's role as a moral leader is most highly valued in times of censorship, oppression, and the need for someone to speak the truth in the face of hardship. While the writer might perhaps have the greatest impact during a time of crisis, that does not mean they are limited to such a role. Havel's presidency established a precedent for future leaders of the Czech Republic to follow and helped ensure the country would not return to communism.

The writer as a figure of resistance is important precisely because he or she offers alternative viewpoints during times when new ways of thinking and understanding the world are so desperately needed. Ideas can spark real change by providing a basis for resistance against oppressive regimes or injustices in society. Havel sums up the power of the written word best in his 1989 speech "A Word on Words": "Whether we are aware of it or not, and however we explain it, one thing would seem to be obvious: we have always believed in the power of words

¹⁸⁰ CBC News, "Milan Kundera Skips Hometown Conference on His Work," *CBC News*, May 30, 2009.

to change history.”¹⁸¹ When utilized properly, words have the power to cut through rhetoric that seeks to conceal the truth—this conclusion seems to have been quite true in the case of Czechoslovakia.

¹⁸¹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 378.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Education

Pennsylvania State University | University Park, PA

The Schreyer Honors College

- Bachelor of Arts in English, Concentration in Professional and Media Writing
 - Bachelor of Arts in History, Honors
-

Employment

Intern at Merion West | Philadelphia, PA

May 2018–August 2018

- Wrote and published opinion-editorial articles featuring political commentary for online media publication
- Assisted with content editing, article writing, and other day-to-day operations of the publication
- Helped edit and transcribe interviews of notable politicians and academics

Writing Tutor at Penn State Learning | University Park, PA

January 2017–present

- Assisted undergraduate students with all forms of writing, including technical, business, and academic writing
- Collaborated one-on-one with students to help them improve content and writing skills
- Fostered better writing habits and continued learning in students

Fellow at The Tab Media | Brooklyn, New York (Remote)

May 2017–

April 2018

- Wrote and published news articles for online publication targeted towards college students
- Helped increase The Tab's media presence and readership with articles gaining over 1,000 views and totaling over 20,000 views combined
- Contributed a series of seven, in-depth articles to The Tab's coverage of the Tim Piazza case, where a fraternity brother at Penn State died during a hazing incident

Editor at The Dangling Modifier | University Park, PA

August

2017–December 2017

- Edited submissions to Penn State Learning's tutoring publication for inclusion in a newsletter sent to writing centers across the country
 - Collaborated and communicated with fellow writing tutors across the country to provide feedback on their pieces
-

Leadership Experience

Penn State International Affairs and Debate Association

September 2016–

present

- Managed and oversaw nine committees and approximately 85 college students for our Penn State Model UN conference for high school students in November 2018
- Directed own crisis committee and led debate during our conference in November 2017