

**TIME**

## Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution Started 30 Years Ago—But It Was Decades in the Making



Czechoslovakian citizens flood the streets of Prague during the Velvet Revolution in 1989 Peter Turnley—Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

BY **ANDY KOPSA**

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**O**n Nov. 17, 1989, student protesters filled the streets of Prague. It was eight days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the same tide of freedom that had swept Berlin seemed to have come to the Czech capital. Police tried to beat back the demonstrators, hoping to tamp down the demand for freedom,

but the people seemed to have grown immune to the brutality of the regime; the show of force only galvanized the resistance.

The students were joined in the coming days by Czechoslovak citizens of all ages. By Nov. 20, a half-million Czechs and Slovaks filled Prague's streets and took over Wenceslas Square. The Communists were forced out. By the end of 1989, Czechoslovakia was on its way to having an elected President for the first time since 1948.

The events of those world-changing days would come to be known as the Velvet Revolution. But, while the Velvet Revolution was over relatively quickly, it had been decades in the making.

## **The Failed "Prague Spring"**

In January of 1968, the USSR gave the leadership of Czechoslovakia to someone new: Alexander Dubček. Dubček had fought against German forces during WWII, joining the communist party in his country after the end of the war. He rose through the ranks, serving in the parliament and general assembly as part of a new generation of Slovak communists. Compared to his successor, the Stalinist Antonin Novotny, Dubček was liberal. Within months, he implemented governmental and economic reforms and allowed citizens increased freedom of speech, including freedom of the press. The people of Czechoslovakia embraced the changes and the period of Dubček's liberalism became known as Prague Spring.

Like the spring, it was fleeting. By August of 1968 the Soviet Union had enough. A more liberal Czechoslovakia was a threat to its regional power and could signal weakness on the world stage. Over half a million Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia; Soviet tanks rolled through the narrow streets of Prague, crushing mostly student-led protests. Soviet loyalist Gustav Husak replaced Dubcek and returned the country to an authoritarian communist regime — but something had changed.

“For once, the Communist and non-Communist worlds — and some countries that find themselves in between — joined in a general condemnation of Soviet force,” TIME noted in a cover story that week. “The free world is accustomed to condemning Russian inroads and intransigence, from the brutal putdown of the Hungarian revolt to the erection of the Berlin Wall. In the past, most Communist countries and parties have either wholeheartedly supported such transgressions — or at least closed their eyes to them — but no longer. Last week, in one country after another, Communists found themselves on the side of the Czechoslovaks.”

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## **Jan Palach**

The following January, Jan Palach, a Charles University student in Prague, entered a suicide pact with several fellow students. They were determined to protest the Soviet invasion and combat growing despondency among citizens after the takeover.

On Jan. 16, 1969, Palach climbed the steps of the National Museum near the bustling train station on the edge of Wenceslas Square. There he doused himself with gasoline and lit a match. In his suicide note he signed his name as “Torch Number 1” — suggesting more self-immolation and protests to come. (Jan Zadjic became “Torch Number 2”; though he couldn’t be directly linked to the original pact, Zadjic participated in group hunger-strike after Palach’s death and was part of the resistance.) Palach lived for three days in a hospital after sustaining burns to 85% of his body. Amazingly, he still managed to give interviews. He spoke softly, his voice rough and halting.

When asked why he had done what he did, Palach replied that he wanted to voice opposition to the Soviet invasion and “make people wake up.” He died three days later.

## The Velvet Revolution

In the decades that followed, Communist rule in Czechoslovakia continued, and the resistance, although forced underground, continued to grow too. By 1989, intermittent uprisings throughout Warsaw Pact countries, the increasing militarism of Soviet governments across the region and slowing economic growth within the Eastern Bloc set the stage for revolution.

In neighboring Poland, Lech Walesa, Anna Walentynowicz and workers of Lenin Shipyards in the Polish city of Gdańsk founded the Polish trade union *Solidarność* — Solidarity. Strikes and non-violent civil disobedience tactics employed by Solidarity paralyzed Baltic seaports. Ultimately, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev later said, it was the catastrophic 1986 nuclear accident at Chernobyl that sounded the death knell of the USSR: as word of the disaster spread, the human cost — already horrific — grew, and the once-content Soviet public no longer believed their government infallible. There was no going back.

In January 1989, 20 years after Jan Palach's death, the clandestine resistance movement formed after the Soviets crushed the promise of Prague Spring planned what they dubbed "Palach Week." For the first time since Palach's self-immolation, they would go to the place where he fell in Wenceslas Square for a public memorial and protest against the ongoing Soviet occupation. Nearly 5,000 people came out the first evening of that week — an unthinkable number since the Prague Spring. It set the stage for what became known as the Velvet Revolution.

That autumn, after a simmering year of protests and the fall of the Berlin Wall, students organized another protest. They chose Nov. 17, the 50-year anniversary of the killings of Prague students by invading Nazi troops.

The English phrase "Velvet Revolution," which the European Parliament Directorate-General for Translation credits to Czech dissident Rita Klímová, signifies the idea that the revolution was brought about without violence —

even though the larger process was not always peaceful. Soldiers beat protesters, used water cannons on the crowd and made numerous arrests. A writer named Vaclav Havel was arrested that night. In 1968, Havel had been in Liberec, a small town outside the capital, when Soviet tanks rolled into his native Prague. Before the regime was able to shut down Liberec's radio station, Havel broadcast several speeches advising fellow citizens to engage peacefully but be prepared to defend themselves, encouraging them to remain loyal to the liberal ideals of the Spring and to resist and persist. So by the time the protests began in 1989 he was a well-known dissident turned leader of a coalition of opposition movements, the Civic Forum.

But when the government-controlled newspaper *Rudé Právo* tried to paint the jailed Havel as a symbol of a supposedly failed freedom movement, it backfired tremendously. By Nov. 28, after constant protests and workers' strikes, the Communists announced they would cede power, and the parliament then removed the one-party provision from the constitution.

In December, Havel's name was put forward as the Forum's candidate for interim president. Two months later, in February 1990, in a speech to a joint session of the U.S. congress, Havel expressed his own disbelief that he was even nominated — yet by that point, he stood before the body as President of Czechoslovakia all the same.

In 1990, the country's first open and free national elections were held. Havel retained his seat until the Velvet Divorce — the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1992 — at which point he stepped down. He then served as President of the Czech Republic from 1993-2003.

## **After the Revolution**

While return to totalitarian rule in Eastern Europe may seem impossible, extremism persists. At this year's commemoration of the fall of the Berlin Wall, German Chancellor Angela Merkle cautioned against complacency. "The values

on which Europe is founded — freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, human rights — they are anything but self-evident,” she said, “and they have to be revitalized and defended time and time again.”

The Czechs and Slovaks have taken to the streets again — the threat no longer Communism but right-wing populism. Last year, protests erupted in Slovakia after the murder of journalist of Jan Kuciak. In June, an estimated 200,000 Czechs flooded the streets demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Andrej Babis. Babis’ rise to power came partly thanks to his vow to crack down on corruption, but he has been accused of inappropriate use of E.U. funds. This spring, Czech police said they recommended fraud charges against him. Allies in the government declined to press such charges as Babis lashed out at the news media, saying, as the *New York Times* reported, that “no one should believe their lies” and he would make the Czech Republic “great again.”

On Nov. 16, crowds estimated in the hundreds of thousands are scheduled to hit the streets to again protest Babis. The student group Million Moments for Democracy organized the protest, picking the date in order to honor the beginning of the Velvet Revolution 30 years ago. Because, as one of the organizers said, without the Velvet Revolution “we wouldn’t even have had the chance to try to change things.”

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