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Velvet revolution, fall of the totalitarian system, return of democracy and freedom (1989)

After the death of several elderly Soviet leaders in 1982-1985, Mikhail Gorbachev led the Communist Party of the USSR and started reforms that impacted the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. Soviet satellite nations were freed from their reliance on Moscow by these reforms. The Soviet Union was economically collapsing, and the reform of communism aimed to save the system. Perestroika and glasnost heralded key internal political and economic changes - Gorbachev declared non-interference in the development of Soviet bloc countries. This late-1980s' spirit of reform was also felt in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. For Czechoslovak's 1988 represented the 20th anniversary of the Warsaw Pact occupation, and the 70th anniversary an independent Czechoslovakia being established. On 21 August spontaneous protests were the first public show of resistance against the regime since 1969. From the autumn of 1988, demonstrations and protests became an almost daily feature of political and social life with which totalitarian power could not cope. On 28 October 1988, Rudé Právo - the newspaper voice of the Communist Party - of Czechoslovakia, eventually mentioned T. G. Masaryk's place in the origins of the Czechoslovak Republic after having concealed his role for years. Nevertheless, demonstrations began in Prague that strengthened the positions of Charter 77 and other opposition organisations. On 10 December 1988, the anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, French President F. Mitterrand received some dissidents (V. Havel, J. Dienstbier, P. Uhl) at the French embassy in Prague, and so expressed his support for their struggle against totalitarian power.



On 15 - 22 January 1959, protests were held in honour of Jan Palach's self-sacrifice, against which the police intervened more harshly than in previous years with the subsequent persecution of several hundred protesters. Václav Havel and other activists were accused of disorderly conduct and imprisoned. The regime responded to Palach's week by passing a strict act 'on upholding public order' whilst simultaneously facing international protests.



The tense situation in the country was heightened by 'A few sentences' text that demanded freedom and democracy, its statement that "this was the time for real and fundamental change" was signed by tens of thousands - it was not just a marginal opposite movement, but the conviction of the overwhelming majority. In August 1989 demonstrations again marked 21 August 1968, and the disintegration of power was becoming increasingly clear. Leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia ranked up the pressure, and the State Security arrested Charter 77

..... spokespeople and editors of the independent Lidové Noviny newspaper. This
..... initiated protests on 12 November 1989 inspired by the sanctification of Agnes of
..... Bohemia in Rome that many associated with foretelling the collapse of
..... communism. The previous effort of Cardinal František Tomášik, defender of
..... religious freedoms and protector of human rights, linked with pilgrimages to
..... celebrate blessed Agnes of Bohemia to Rome, became a national pilgrimage and
..... civil protest. The symbolism was finally fulfilled, and after the cardinal returned
..... home the regime collapsed over several days. This happened after a brutal attack
..... by State Security emergency regiments and Public Security armed units in
..... Národní třída against a permitted student demonstration (to mark the
..... International Day of Students) on 17 November 1989, fuelled by the apparent
..... killing of student Martin Šmíd. Although this demo had been immediately
..... suppressed, it started a wave of protests that led to the collapse of the communist
..... regime in days.


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References: