

Reflections on the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia¹

JACQUES RUPNIK

Research Professor Emeritus,
SciencesPo Center for International Studies, Paris, France
e-mail: jacques.rupnik@sciencespo.fr

Anniversaries usually provide an opportunity or pretext to look back and, from a distance, to reflect upon historical events.

It was a little trickier with the history of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ), as the object of research was also a political subject. The former regime in Czechoslovakia even founded a new discipline, devoted to the “History of the KSČ”, with ambitions to hold a position of superiority in historiography.

After 1989 the KSČ was the only communist party in East-Central Europe that had only rebadged its name to Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM) and had not reneged on its past legacy, which contributed to politicizing research into the party’s history beyond what would otherwise have been the case. The media obviously amplified the trend: Three years ago, I was asked by a radio reporter whether I saw the risk of a “new February coup”. It was a bit like having someone in 1945 consider the return of the Austro-Hungarian regime as the biggest threat to Czechoslovak politics.

Over the past 30 years it has not always been easy to distinguish the historiography of the KSČ from the memory of communism or the coming to terms with the communist past.

Therefore, a certain detachment is recommended, which can be achieved by looking from above as well as from below.

To put it in simply you can have two different approaches to major historical milestones. The battle of Waterloo, for instance as 200 years having passed since Napoleon’s death, can be seen from a bird’s-eye view, like Victor Hugo did: grand strategy, Napoleon, Blucher, Wellington, i.e., great men making “great” History.

1 Introductory presentation at the conference *100 let od založení KSČ. Dědictví československého komunismu* (100 Years Since the Founding of the KSČ. The Legacy of Czechoslovak Communism) organised by ÚSTR (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes), and ÚSD AV ČR (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences) on 13., and 19.–21. May 2021.

Or you can see the battle as Stendhal and his hero Fabrice del Dongo in the *Charterhouse of Parma*, who ponders and wanders the battlefield. In other words, history as seen from below.

In a similar way, you can try to put the history of the KSČ into the wider context of the 20th century, “the age of the extremes”, as British historian Eric Hobsbawm called it. The emergence of the party, linked with World War One. Its seizure of power, linked with World War Two. Between East and West, between capitalism and socialism, between democracy and totalitarianism.

Or, you can try to take a look from below through the so-called history of everydayness, through life stories, considering the motivations and fates of those involved in the communist movement in that period, or those who opposed it and became its victims after coup d'état in 1948. A special topic in this category is the relationship of intellectuals to the KSČ: “la trahison des clerc” (“the betrayal of the learned” – French philosopher and novelist Julien Benda and the identification of intellectuals with the new powers that be is one version, which, however, should not deny the attempt to explain the appeal of an idea or utopia, especially after the breakdown of the old order in 1918 and again between 1938–1945. You can find a remarkable assemblage of the Czech cultural elite in the 1946 brochure entitled *Můj poměr ke KSČ. Projevy z řad pracujících intelligence* (My Attitude to the KSČ. Speeches from the ranks of Working Intelligence) and in contrast, those who upheld their independence and their distance such as the philosopher Jan Patočka, the literary critic and scholar, Vaclav Černý or the artist Jiří Kolář.

Sometimes the story of an individual can be combined with a broader reflection of a historical period: Forty-five years have passed since my first publication about Josef Guttman, and I am now preparing a collection of his writings: two lives (in Prague and in New York), two names, two views of the KSČ and its time. A former member of the party leadership in the late 1920s, he became a left-wing dissident from the KSČ as Hitler came to power; and after the World War II, in the USA, he went on to become a profound analyst of communist regimes and totalitarianism, publishing in January 1953 the very first analysis of the Slánský political trial of November 1952. Only he could have written it that way, having been both on the inside as well as on the outside. It is a remarkable human story, and Guttman provides a keen reflection on the history of the KSČ in the Central European as well as the global contexts.

So, after a long hiatus, I am returning to the same scene with unresolved old puzzles and new questions.

Every generation of historians asks different questions, and corrects or challenges the approach of their predecessors. In this respect, every historiography which tries to take a different approach to an established narrative is in fact “revisionist”.

After 1948, the local official historians in Prague promoted a teleological view of the “Victorious February” as part of History on the march, while in the West it was the strategy and tactics of the seizure of power in the Cold War context, which is a paraphrase of Josef Korbel’s book *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia, 1938–1948. The Failure of Coexistence* (and was shared to different degrees by other scholars, such as Paul Zinner in the US or Heinrich Kuhn in Germany).

The Czechoslovak historiography of the 1960s was “revisionist” not only as regards its re-interpretation of history (domestic traditions vs Soviet/Stalinist influence) but also in its spillover into politics and justice. The revision of the history of the KSČ had an obvious political impact and some historians, for instance, Karel Kaplan, also became active members of rehabilitation commissions for the victims of the purge trials offering a highly critical reading of the history of the 1950s.

At the same time, historians and political scientists in the West, such as Gordon Skilling and Archie Brown, drew inspiration from the reformist context of the 1960s and especially the Prague Spring, and in their studies from the early 1970s they rejected the totalitarian model as obsolete and offered a new interpretation, which could be summed up as follows: a gradual corruption of the communist system under the influence of the democratic political culture in society and over time also within the KSČ itself.

In the 1970s my own approach was different again: The questions I asked were the continuation but also a departure from the aforementioned historiography of the 1960s.

This led me then along a different path, i.e., to an effort to understand the local causes for the failures of the political leadership in 1938, 1948 and 1968, and mainly the duality of communism in Czechoslovakia: a majority split in Social Democracy, the largest party in the most democratic country in East Central Europe gave rise to one of the most hardline Stalinist parties in the Communist International. In 1946, unlike in the rest of the region, the KSČ succeeded in gaining 40% in the election in the Czech lands (30% in Slovakia) and then installed one of the harshest dictatorships in the region in the 1950s, almost unshaken by the events of 1956.

And again in 1968: socialism with the smiling face of Alexander Dubček, and the most far-reaching attempt to bring about the separation of Party and State and a democratisation of socialism. And subsequently the so-called “normalisation” of the party and of society, which for twenty years did not even try to imitate János Kádár’s compromise.

This raises interesting research questions. The KSČ belonged to two political systems: the international communist system with its headquarters in Moscow, and also the Czechoslovak political system of parliamentary democracy.

The Bolshevisation of the KSČ in the late 1920s, the Stalinisation of the republic in the 1950s, the “normalisation” of the 1970s – all these periodically brought the tension between the two systems into the open. Yet the same time, we can-

not satisfy ourselves with the idea that everything came from outside, raising an uncomfortable and complicated questions for a historian today, concerning the domestic roots of Stalinism.

My hypothesis since the 1970s was: The Stalinist shield had to be all the stronger because there was a strong recurring “reformist temptation” during the so-called First Czechoslovak Republic as well as immediately after the war. And then there was this egalitarian plebeian nature of the political culture of Czech democracy which made a far from negligible part of the society “vulnerable” to the project and rhetoric of the KSČ.

In the new context after 1989, studies of the KSČ moved to understanding the “logics of totalitarianism”, which covered the whole of the post-war period. This makes it easier to satisfy political scientists, who emphasize the “system”, its logic and its tools, rather than historians, whose periodisation of the post-war period in East-Central Europe does not quite fit with the “system”. From the point of view of political science, you can emphasize that the KSČ as the party-state remained the central pillar of the post-war political system. A historian must analyse its transformations and different periods (1945–1948, 1948–1956, the sixties culminating in 1968, 1969–1989) And this also applies to the membership: Joining the KSČ during the First Republic or in the war-time resistance was not the same as joining the party in the 1950 or in the 1970s. The KSČ was like a sieve: Some six million people passed through the party between 1945 and 1989. One and a half million members in 1968; half a million were purged in the immediate aftermath; another half a million joined during the normalisation period...

Recently we have witnessed a “Historikerstreit”, a conflict of two revisionisms: One is focused on the post-war period, especially from the viewpoint of the repressive mechanisms of the regime, and helped to create a new narrative about the so-called “third resistance” (WWI, WWII and under communism).

The other, on the contrary, emphasizes consensus or even a sort of “societal acceptance” between the regime and society, based on the emergence of a consumer society. The first group offers a heroic story with which society can hardly identify, while the other downplays the conditions, including the violence and coercion, under which a major part of society succumbed. And the same applies to the KSČ: to „normalize“ the party in order to „normalize“ the society. The half a million „revisionists“ and rebels purged after 1968, replaced by half a million obedient cynics and pragmatists during the following decade of “normalisation”.

These matters were no doubt addressed during the conference. A conference held in a new context. We are seeing the gradual decline of the KSČ/KSČM, which is striving – the sign of the times – to compensate for this by a drift to nationalist populism. It used to have 12–15% in every election in the 1990s. In the last election the figure was 7%, and the latest opinion polls indicate that it probably will no longer make it into Parliament. That would mean that a certain period has come

to a close. When I was writing my thesis about the KSČ, I used the title *The History of the KSČ. From the Beginnings to the Seizure of Power*. The 100th anniversary of the KSČ could actually be marked with the subtitle of *From the Beginnings to the Demise*.

When a certain period closes, the time of historicisation arrives. This means that it should now be easier to distinguish research into the history of the KSČ from the arguments over the politics of memory of communism and the so-called coming to terms with the past.

It should also enable new approaches and interpretations which extend beyond the Czechoslovak context.

This monothematic issue of *Securitas Imperii* journal is a new chapter in the historiography of the KSČ. I wish to see success in that endeavour.