



University  
of Glasgow

Culik, J. (2014) James Krapfl, Revolution with a Human Face. Politics, Culture and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 56(3-4), pp. 356-357.

This is a scanned version of the original print copy.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/152055/>

Deposited on: 24 November 2017



Culik, J. (2014) James Krapfl, Revolution with a Human Face. Politics, Culture and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 56(3-4), pp. 356-357.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/152055/>

Deposited on: 24 November 2017

of a substantial discussion of the dissolution of the Soviet Union with regards to the breaking away of the Eastern European satellite states. This subject is quickly summarized in no more than one paragraph with little differentiation between the nations. This brevity could be forgiven if the book ended with the end of the Soviet Union but, in his chapter on the 1990s, Kocho-Williams makes clear that Russian foreign policy changed. Russia no longer dealt with its former satellites as former satellites but instead as independent nations, thus leading to a new aspect to its foreign policy. An appreciation of this shift could have been made greater had the tensions between Russia and Eastern Europe during the dissolution of the Soviet Union been more fully presented.

Ultimately, the book is a fine textbook for any class on twentieth-century Russian foreign policy. It, however, must be supplemented by appropriate lectures to truly be of maximum use. There are too many instances where events are superficially summarized and an extra paragraph here or there would allow this textbook to stand alone and serve as an excellent introduction to understanding Russian, or Soviet, foreign policy. That said, this publication still is a worthwhile contribution in that it provides admirable analysis of the undercurrents of Russian foreign policy in the twentieth century by one of the leading Russian foreign policy historians today.

Oleksa Drachewych, *McMaster University*

**James Krapfl. *Revolution with a Human Face. Politics, Culture and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992.*** Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. xxi, 260 pp. Illustrations. Index. \$45.00, cloth.

Most Czechs and Slovaks these days are deeply unhappy with the political, cultural, economic, and moral state of their two countries. As James Krapfl himself acknowledges in the introduction to his work, any reference to the idealism of the 1989 revolution usually produces ironic, hollow laughter. Even the late Czech president Václav Havel brutally parodied his own highly idealistic revolutionary slogan from 1989 “Love and Truth Will Prevail over Lies and Hatred” in his recent film *Leaving* (2011). We all know in what disappointment all the “Arab Spring revolutions” ended. Why are the outcomes of revolutions so disappointing? Krapfl examines in detail the mechanism of revolutions using the example of the first weeks and months of the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia from November 1989 onwards. He points out that to date, historians have usually studied only the narrative of the decision-making *elites*; the views and actions of ordinary people outside the main centres of power have been generally ignored. Krapfl examines the Czechoslovak 1989 revolution from the point of view of *non-elites* and discovers rather startling and important information, which has either long been forgotten or has been distorted or suppressed by the authors of the elite power discourse. While he uses Czechoslovak material, his conclusions are of a general nature and constitute a significant contribution to the analysis of revolutions in general.

Using the theories of the narratologists Hayden White and Northrop Frye, Krapfl notes that historical narratives are always subjective accounts of events. They are verbal structures which of necessity conform to the laws of literary narration. Thus they are not authentic reflections of what really happened. For instance, a narrative must have a discernible beginning, middle, and end, and that is not always the case with real historical events. Thus, in human interpretation, historical events are usually reduced to a limited number of simplified, well-known, stereotyped narrative emplotments: romantic, comedic, tragic, or ironic. In charting the early history of the 1989 Czechoslovak fall of communism,

Krapfl takes Lynn Hunt’s study of the rhetoric of the 1789 French revolution as a source of inspiration. Analyzing the Czechoslovak events, he finds a similar pattern of development as in France in the late 1780s.

The Czechoslovak November 1989 revolution started with an event which shocked the population of Czechoslovakia and brought Czech and Slovak citizens into the streets in hundreds of thousands. A student march in Prague, commemorating the events of the autumn of 1939, when the German Nazi occupiers closed down Czechoslovak universities, was diverted by the secret police from its official route into the city centre; its participants were “kettled” by the police and brutally beaten. The Czechoslovak public was shocked. The moral outrage that this “massacre” (parallels were drawn with the Tiananmen Square events of June of the same year) produced a powerful, highly romantic revolutionary discourse adhered to by most citizens in the whole of the Czechoslovak Republic. This discourse, which was in opposition to what the elites wanted (and the elites eventually suppressed it) is what Krapfl analyzes. The discourse was highly idealistic. Czechoslovak citizens did not wish for a return to capitalism. Their primary demand was that society should cultivate decent, human relations. Politicians in power were to become truly representative. They were to be regularly and frequently controlled by referendum. If they betrayed or disappointed their voters, they were to be recalled. *Lidskost*, that is “humanness,” was the paramount value of the revolution, which prided itself on non-violence, pluralism, dialogue, and direct democracy. There were to be regular checks on institutional power and there were to be free elections at all levels, not just in politics but also in workplaces—even chief executives of businesses were to be elected by the workforce. The principles of the revolution were fairness, socialism (socialism was to be preserved and renewed, not dismantled), and revolutionary idealism. Krapfl sharply criticizes Jürgen Habermas and François Furet for arguing, without bothering to study the actual evidence, that “the 1989 Revolutions did not produce anything original.” Krapfl convincingly demonstrates that actually what the 1989 Czechoslovak Revolution produced in its first weeks was pretty original.

However, when activists outside the main city centres set about realizing their idealistic aims, they were stopped by the new elites. The elites imposed a “comedic” narrative on the nation, arguing that changes should not be too profound and there should be reconciliation. The elites used fraudulent machinations and bullying to achieve their ends, especially when trying to make sure that their candidate, Václav Havel, was made Czechoslovak president. Havel, the proponent of “living in truth” under communism, lied in order to secure the presidential post for himself. Revolutionary effervescence was suppressed, and rule was taken over by city elites. Semi-authoritarian parties, Václav Klaus’s ODS in the Czech Republic and Vladimír Mečiar’s HZDS in Slovakia took over power, divided Czechoslovakia into two separate republics against the people’s will, introduced an electoral system which the people did not want, and imposed their controversial, post-communist will on their respective countries. It was not until after their fall in the late 1990s that the two countries returned to a somewhat more democratic rule, but the idealistic system of direct democracy and constant checks on politicians, demanded by the citizens in the early days of the revolution, was never installed. No wonder most Czechs and Slovaks now feel that the 1989 democratic revolution was stolen from them.

Krapfl’s work is extremely valuable due to its meticulous analysis of large numbers of documents from the early weeks of the 1989 democratic revolution. His analysis brings to light many aspects of the revolution which have been long forgotten.

Jan Čulík, *University of Glasgow*