

MURPHY, Thomas K. *Czechoslovakia Behind the Curtain: Life, Work and Culture in the Communist Era*. McFarland, 2018. ISBN 9781476631776.

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## Czechoslovakia Behind the Curtain: Life, Work and Culture in the Communist Era

*Reviewed by Tomáš Kratina*

The publication by the American author Thomas K. Murphy, entitled *Czechoslovakia Behind the Curtain: Life, Work and Culture in the Communist Era*, focuses on the modern period of Czech history between 1948 and the first half of the 1990s. From a global point of view, it was a significant historical epoch characterised mainly by a globally polarised world with a significant threat of nuclear conflict between the divided *East* and *West*, or the rivalry of Eastern bloc powers represented by a hegemon in the form of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with its communist ideology and, on the other hand, the Western world led by the United States, presenting itself as a democratic and free society. The two *worlds* were separated by the so-called *Iron Curtain*, which also passed through the territory of then Czechoslovakia, meaning an imaginary and de facto border.

T.K. Murphy grew up in the United States, in Washington D.C., during the second half of the Cold War. He is interested in the world of politics and politicians and has managed to work for important institutions such as the US House of Representatives and the office of a US Senator. After defending his doctoral studies (Ph.D.), he taught history and culture at the University of Prešov between 1997 and 1999. He now lives and writes alternately in Italy and Belgium.

The author's book is constructed as a professional historical publication, mapping Czechoslovak history both in terms of time contexts that causally followed each other and according to fundamental political-socio-cultural phe-

nomena. The book is divided into ten chapters dealing with key topics, it also contains an introduction, conclusion, notes and bibliographic citations. From a general point of view, the individual chapters deal with education, entertainment and culture, everyday life behind the *Iron Curtain*, communist ideology and the Communist Party, religion and the events of the Prague Spring, and subsequent normalisation. In the preface, Murphy presents the methodology by which he obtained the relevant data and information used to process the book. He finds fundamental starting points both in the richly quoted literature and in the oral testimony and narration of the direct participants of the people of that time. Above all, these testimonies give the publication a revival and dynamism and help the reader, through personal experiences, to better empathise with the time being described. The cover of the book has the corresponding appearance, is interesting and at first glance corresponds to its contents. The annotation has a telling character and fulfills its briefly informative purpose, on the basis of which a potential reader of the publication can form a basic idea of what the book is about.

For the potential Czech or Slovak reader, the book offers a very interesting view of the events of that time from the outside, i.e. from the opposite side of the *Iron Curtain*. It is obvious the author's intention is not to distort the information provided and not to side with the East or the West. It also examines related historical and political topics, especially the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact, Marxism-Leninism and others. The author presents a very interesting view of the issue of communism and Western democracy through a black-and-white view of the world from the perspective of the West. According to the then (especially American) doctrine the USA and its Western allies were the good ones (us) and the Soviets and their allies (they) the bad ones. The US masterfully used this phenomenon to convince its own population in several campaigns, especially during the Vietnam War (Vietnam was and is a socialist republic with a communist ideology).

The reviewer, without any intention to challenge the author's careful work, would point out some shortcomings that may have been mentioned in the book or are not listed correctly enough. For example, the author makes this claim: 'Czechoslovakia no longer existed in 1997, having broken in half during the Velvet Revolution of 1993.' This information is wrong, as while Czechoslovakia was indeed divided into two countries on 1st January 1993, the Velvet Revolution took place in 1989 and it was not a direct cause of the dissolution.

There is a lack of closer explanation of some typical contemporary concepts or names that we encounter minimally in modern times, such as the 'vekslák' (very difficult to translate, but it was a type of street vendor, often with a criminal history, who illegally sold the Tuzex currency *bony* to consumers with unfa-

avourable exchange rates) or ‘socialismus s lidskou tvář’ (socialism with a human face – it should have been socialism, or communist rule but with a lesser level of repression and more freedom for the population). A deeper explanation of such concepts can lead to misunderstandings, especially among foreign readers. Finally, the chapter ‘Comedy and the Regime’ mentions only the performance of the popular comedian pair Lasica and Satinský, which is a pity because there were a number of comedy and popular pairs: let’s just mention Šimek and Grossmann, Šimek and Sobota, Bohdalová and Dvořák, or the self-performing (today we would use the modern term ‘stand-up comedian’) Vladimír Menšík, singer Ivan Mládek and many others.

On the contrary, the author goes into great detail on all the other topics, which he analyses in an engaging and understandable way and in sufficient depth. The reviewer deliberately states the word on the grounds that a scientifically in-depth analysis of all international and national circumstances would not be suitable for this type of publication and would unnecessarily lead the reader to another sphere. The events before and after August 1968, i.e. the entry of the Warsaw Pact troops and the subsequent occupation, are particularly well described, and Murphy correctly uses the term *Prague spring* here. For the vast majority of Czechoslovaks, this period was and is a national tragedy comparable to the entry of German Third Reich troops in March 1939. In addition, all was exacerbated by a sense of betrayal to suppress the counter-revolution here. Normalisation, i.e. a return to the pre-August regime in the 1970s and 1980s, is also clearly described and explained, including the participation of key politicians such as Dubček, Bílák, Husák, Jakeš, Štrougal and others. The author’s submission reveals the grayness, apathy and resignation that locals felt during normalisation. The author also deals with smaller, rather social phenomena that were so typical of the communist era in Czechoslovakia. These include under-counter sales, the purchase of foreign goods in Tuzex and payment in a currency called vouchers, a penchant for lodging, bribery, lack of goods and scarce goods, a centrally planned economy, a pioneer organisation and much more. At the same time, T.K. Murphy is aware that the described issue did not strictly concern only Czechoslovakia, but also other states of the Eastern Bloc and partly, in connection with the local events, he also mentions Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia and East Germany.

## Conclusion

The whole book can be warmly recommended as a professional, clear, unbiased and impartial source of information related to Czechoslovakia during the reign of the totalitarian communist regime (1948-1989). Foreign but also Czech-Slovak readers will be addressed by a dynamically written publication, which is not

not just a dry collection of historical data and contexts of an encyclopedically structured type. Readers will be able to understand the basic functioning of the then communist regime, its society and population. Aspects of everyday life and the desires of ordinary people, who sometimes did not even have enough basic consumer goods, are very well explained. Václav Klaus sr. (a prominent Czech post-November politician, ex-president of the Czech Republic, professor of economics and active participant in contemporary public and political life [reviewer's note]) in his book *30 Years of the Road to Freedom. But also back* (2019) states his opinion, which may correspond to the message of Murphy's book, that thanks to the experienced totalitarianism, Czechoslovaks value the acquired freedoms, democracy, free market, enough goods and other aspects which were a matter of course for Western society.