Czech Responses to Thatcher and Thatcherism

The Evidence of the Newspapers, 1984-2013[1]

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This article explores change and continuity in the evolution of the mainstream Czech and Czechoslovak discourse on Thatcherism and Margaret Thatcher's own political persona. It examines the attitudes and positions on these matters as expressed and channelled through Czech-language mass print platforms, intended for broad public readership. Elaborating on the intricate and interest-infused roles that print and other mass media play in the design and architecture of socio-political discourse, the reception of Thatcher and Thatcherism in the Czech lands will be shown to have relied heavily on the affective, symbolic and inter-symbolic parameters and signifiers of the respective ruling political discourses that defined the key periods and transitions from the 1980s onwards. Ultimately, the study reveals the manner in which the image of Margaret Thatcher and her legacy have been synthesised and established in the Czech popular – as well as professional – imagery, memory and parlance, only to be transformed, re-synthesised and re-established again.

Keywords: Thatcher, Thatcherism, Czech Thatcherism, Czech transformation, Czech(oslovak) media.

The question of how Thatcher and Thatcherism were received in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic[2] remains largely unex-

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plored by historians and political scientists. Focus has tended to centre on the career and policies of Václav Klaus, self-proclaimed Thatcherite and leading force behind the rapid development of a market economy, parliamentary democracy and Western integration in the Czech Republic after decades of Soviet-inspired and -enforced Communism.[3] Concepts such as 'Thatcherism, Czech-style' and 'Czech Thatcherism' – developed, it must be said, by Anglophone political scientists – have highlighted parallels between Thatcher's Britain and Klaus's Czech Republic of the 1990s. Peter Rutland concluded that Klaus invoked Thatcher and other figures of the New Right for rhetorical purposes, while in reality his neo-liberal programme was shaped overwhelmingly by pragmatism and opportunism; the policies of Klaus's ODS (Civic Democratic Party) were a 'curious form of Thatcherism'.[4] Seán Hanley has revealed common economic and philosophical influences among British Thatcherites and the 1990s Czech Right, and suggests that both movements faced similar political circumstances in their respective decades. Adopting Stuart Hall's concept of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, Hanley argued that 1980s British Thatcherites and the 1990s Czech Right successfully confronted the same challenge of securing popular consent for an ideology originally developed by theorists inhabiting the political margins.

Nonetheless, important gaps in our knowledge remain. Little is known about how specific Thatcher policies were regarded by Czech observers, even less about how Thatcher was perceived outside the rarefied circles of Czech intellectual and professional political circles; Thatcher's portrayal in the Czech media and her standing among Czech women (for the politicians and intellectuals were almost all men) remain unexplored. This article proposes to fill, at least partially, one of these gaps, by examining how Thatcher and Thatcherism were portrayed in Czech newspapers and current affairs magazines from the mid-1980s until her death in 2013, with a view to postulating more broadly on the position of Thatcher in a Czech context. It begins with a discussion of the relationship between politics and the print media in the Czech context before and after 1989. The greater part of the article is comprised of a series of case studies of Czech press responses to Thatcher and Thatcherism. For the Communist era, reactions to the 1984-5 UK miners' strike and Thatcher's 1987 Soviet Union visit are examined. Post-1989 case studies include Thatcher's resignation as premier, her visits to Prague in 1990 and 1999 and her death. We

show that under Communism Thatcherism was portrayed as the antithesis of Czechoslovakia's socialist values, while after 1989 Thatcher and Thatcherism were framed as exemplars for a nation in the process of liberal-democratic state-building and consolidation: a 'cult' of Thatcher became established. Between the late 1990s and 2013 the cult of Thatcher remained firmly entrenched, but, in a turn which reflected widespread disenchantment with post-1989 politics, Thatcher was presented once again as a kind of antithesis, as her apparent resolve and integrity were contrasted with a Czech political establishment often criticised for weakness and corruptibility.

Media, Politics and the Czechs

The present article adopts as a theoretical starting point the old Gramscian thesis – along with its modern reiterations and applications – that journalists, newspapers and media in general are highly instrumental in the 'production and dissemination of ideas and knowledge' and are potentially crucial vehicles of state-approved political ideology, depending on the extent of the synergy between the media and the state.[5] To quote Stuart Hall, the media and related institutions should be seen as not only having 'reflected and sustained the consensus' but as 'the institutions which have helped to produce consensus and which manufactured consent'.[6] In other words, the acts of selecting, framing, disseminating and validating knowledge – all being the defining features of the media's *modus operandi* – is inevitably a political act that renders the media a resource, ready to be tapped into by political interests or the interests of the ruling ideology. Czech newspapers' reception of Thatcher and Thatcherism represents a pertinent case study of the so-called media-politics nexus in practice. As we shall show, in Communist times the connection between the state and the media was near-absolute. During the Klaus era between roughly 1990 and 1997 the media-political nexus remained strong, facilitating a largely favourable media response to his agenda (reminiscent of Hall's observation of Thatcherism's success as a hegemonic project in 1980s Britain). From the late 1990s state-media synergy was reduced and discourse became more fractured. To expand on these latter points, and complete our opening *tour d'horizon*, a brief note on the Czech press is called for.

Both the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion and the 1989 Communist collapse had seismic impacts on the Czech print media. The comparatively liberal journalism of the Prague Spring was viewed by the Soviet authorities as a direct threat to the stability of the Eastern Bloc, and the Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia was partly driven by a determination to control public discourse. In the aftermath of the invasion, the Czechoslovak Communist Party asserted its grip over the media and reclaimed its monopoly on the dissemination of public information. Newspapers were published either by the Communist Party itself (for example, the national daily *Rudé právo* [Red Justice]), or by institutions with Party approval, such as the Union of Socialist Youth, whose daily *Mladá fronta* (Young Front) was the second most important newspaper; trade unions, authorised political parties as well as the regions also had their own newspapers. Of course, market forces did not apply. Rather, titles were accorded a certain amount of paper according to the degree to which each adhered to Party orthodoxy. *Rudé právo* was accorded the largest amount, and had a print-run of over a million in the 1980s.[7]

The reporting of politics was stringently controlled, and framed in terms of a Communist 'us' and a capitalist 'them', with the subtext being that victory for 'us' was inevitable.[8] Nor was this pattern disrupted by the glasnost initiative. Glasnost, along with perestroika, was paid lip-service by the Czechoslovak government, which remained wary of Gorbachev's initiatives until the regime's collapse: the glasnost-era media enjoyed appreciably greater freedoms in the Soviet Union, Poland and Hungary than in Czechoslovakia. There was some alternative to the state-controlled media. Samizdat material, including the newspaper *Lidové noviny* (People's News), was read by a small circle of dissidents; there was a wider audience for Western radio; but both forms were risky and, in the case of foreign broadcasting, subject to constant jamming efforts. For many Czechs, there was no consistent or easily obtainable alternative to the state-sanctioned media.[9]

The crumbling of Communist Party power in 1989 triggered major change in the Czech media. As part of a general attack on Communist-era practices, restrictions regarding media ownership and control were lifted by the Press Law of March 1990. Newspapers became privately owned businesses within the rapidly developing market economy and could be established or acquired with relative ease.[10] Foreign ownership and the drive for profits accelerated change: tabloid news-

papers with sensationalist stories and heavy concentration on entertainment and smut appeared. The leading example of this, the daily *Blesk* (Flash), quickly became established in the top three selling newspapers. Established titles were forced to reinvent themselves. This was hardest for *Rudé právo*, with its intimate links to the Communist Party; it survived, however, and was the second largest selling newspaper in 1995, by which time its name had altered to the less overtly Communist *Právo*. *Mladá fronta* emerged from the Velvet Revolution with greater credibility than *Rudé právo*, as many of its journalists had championed the challenge to Communist rule. However, it too underwent significant alterations, including the addition of the word *Dnes* (Today) to its title. During the 1990s the *Mladá fronta* part was progressively minimised in the masthead, and the paper became conventionally referred to simply as *Dnes*.[11] *Dnes* was the top-selling daily by 1995 with a print-run of 348,000. Another title that survived the Velvet Revolution was the former samizdat *Lidové noviny*, which, although having enjoyed unrivalled moral capital at the start of the new decade, has not managed to establish itself as a leading read.[12]

Despite the 1990 Press Law newspapers remained closely attached to the political establishment. In the crucial years of neo-liberal transformation during the early to mid-1990s, the press – and the media in general – was remarkably compliant with the striking turn in government policy and ideology.[13] Several causes of this can be identified. First, there was a general public backlash against the Communist Party and its rhetoric immediately after 1989; by the same token, former dissidents and advocates of a market economy and Western engagement, previously denied space in public discourse, suddenly became co-opted into the journalistic fraternity, their commentaries and opinion pieces now greatly esteemed. Additionally, Klaus and his allies proved capable of courting, persuading and intimidating the media: ample column inches were allotted to interviews and commentaries with and from Klaus, while in 1995 an aborted bill by Klaus's minister of culture Pavel Tigrid would have severely restricted journalistic freedoms and rights. Finally, newspaper editors and owners were prepared to use their titles as 'mouthpieces' of ODS-led governments for ideological reasons: they approved of the unfolding political and economic reforms and regarded the ODS as the legitimate driving force behind those reforms.[14]

From around 1997 the press began to shake off partially its subservient attitude to government. This turn has been interpreted as a

response to declining newspaper sales which was itself stimulated by public dissatisfaction with a staid and unchallenging print media.[15] It also stemmed from the revelation that members of Klaus's ODS party had taken bribes as part of the privatisation process, a scandal which caused the collapse of the government. Concurrent economic problems and rising unemployment laid bare some of the recklessness of the rapid transition to the free market and led to an erosion of trust in the hitherto dominant neo-liberal doctrine: the pattern of consensus between people, media and politics had been broken.[16] In this altered context, there was a partial relaxing of the politics-media nexus, although there was to be no revolution. Self-censorship continued to be practiced by editors and journalists and unwritten 'rules' continued to apply regarding which political issues could be raised. The press remained fertile ground for the powerful to project their influence and for journalists to help mould consensus.[17]

'And they call it democracy …': Thatcher before 1989

Czech reportage of the 1984-85 UK miners' strike and the 1987 visit to Moscow highlights the myriad of negative ways in which Thatcher and Thatcherism were portrayed in Communist times. Both *Rudé právo* and *Mladá fronta* covered the strike in great detail, drawing upon their London correspondents in addition to British sources including the *Morning Star*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The strike, then, was a convenient vehicle for highlighting the 'reality' of Western life, and contrasting it with conditions in a benevolent Communist state such as Czechoslovakia. Within the reports, terms such as 'anti-citizen', 'anti-human', 'anti-social', 'inhuman' pepper the descriptions of government action.[18] These are the terms in which one of the few explicit pre-1989 references to Thatcherism was offered: a headline story in *Rudé právo* of November 1984 spoke of '"Thatcherism" i.e. unfeeling plans of high capital to the detriment of the workers'.[19] Nine months earlier *Mladá fronta* informed its readers that Thatcher's policies were about 'constantly increasing unemployment'.[20]

Although in the early months of the dispute there were cautious predictions that the strikers could succeed, there was also a blunt realisation of the price of failure. According to the London-based correspondent Aleš Benda, writing in *Mladý svět* (Young world) magazine,

'If the miners are to lose their struggle, the Conservative government can be expected to proceed even further with its anti-working class policy'.[21] Moreover, attention often centred on the British media, judiciary and the police (on one occasion compared to Nazis), which were dismissed as being Conservative Party dupes, under ironical headlines such as 'And they call it democracy …'[22] Meanwhile, Thatcher's apparent disregard for the interests of the British working class was contrasted with conditions in Czechoslovakia. Much was made of the invitation extended by the Czechoslovak coalminers' union to their British counterparts and their families to holiday at a Slovak resort in October 1984. Reports related how the visitors marvelled at witnessing a workers' state in action. Enticing comparisons between both countries were duly drawn: 'In capitalist Britain workers and their families starve when they rise against the government's plans to destroy jobs, mining communities and trade unions. Socialist countries (on the other hand) send these workers food and invite them over for a holiday'.[23]

Thatcher's role in the controversy and the importance of her 'iron' character were often emphasised. Writing in *Mladý svět*, Aleš Benda summarised the state of the dispute in September 1984. He noted that the strike, as winter approached, would be a test for the Conservatives and in particular Thatcher, 'who has built her career on her reputation of being the "Iron Lady". She is famous for not making any concessions to strikers, unions and Left-wing pressures'.[24] This was reiterated on a *Rudé právo* front page two months later, which noted that the strike was entering a critical stage for Thatcher and her government. 'Not only is Margaret Thatcher's image as the "Iron Lady", unprepared to make any compromise, at stake. She wants to break the miners. Their victory would mean her political defeat'.[25] In January 1985 *Mladá fronta* blamed Thatcher for the failure to reach a settlement that would allow the strikers to return to work: the NUM's negotiations with the government had been nothing more than a 'waste of time'.[26]

Where the miners' strike reveals the Czech press's reception of domestic Thatcherism, our second case study, Thatcher's 1987 Moscow visit, casts light on Czech reporting on Thatcher the diplomat. In contrast to prevailing Western views of the visit, the contemporary Czech newspapers accounts were steeped in negativity and cynicism. For example, the reporting of the meetings with the Soviet leadership tended to contrast a reactionary and stubborn Thatcher with an open-minded and reasonable Gorbachev. The Soviet leader was shown labouring to

establish 'trust' between the West and the Soviet Union, and to broker a nuclear weapons deal by offering major concessions, all of which Thatcher rebuffed 'with a hardness that is typical for her'.[27] Gorbachev was cast in a professorial light, with the role of pupil for Thatcher, especially on the subject of perestroika.[28] Gorbachev's presentations on the inherent superiority of socialism, perestroika and the USSR's enlightened foreign policies were quoted and summarised at length; far less space was given to Thatcher's remarks in defence of NATO and nuclear deterrence.[29] An opinion piece reflecting on the meeting effectively sums up the official Czechoslovak perception of Thatcher the diplomat: 'Let us hope that the lesson she took from the open dialogue in Moscow will project itself into practical steps by her government … The present day requires new thinking'.[30]

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The notion that Thatcher represented old thinking and Gorbachev new was the most prevalent aspect of the Czechoslovak reporting of the Moscow visit. *Rudé právo* criticised Thatcher's flawed perception of the Soviet Union as belligerent and committed to spreading Communism; according to the newspaper, this view had been entirely disproved by Gorbachev. It maintained the time had come for open-mindedness and trust but concluded that 'we feel that Britain and her prime minister are not playing this role as well as they could'.[31] *Rudé právo* returned to this theme in an article reflecting on the outcomes of the visit titled 'Old thinking meets new'. Here, the picture of Thatcher as pre-détente relic was given its greatest elaboration. The article began: 'Two worlds, two ways of thinking, two world concepts have met in open discussion'. It identified Thatcher's famous stubbornness as the sole reason for the failure of the USSR and the West to reach an arms agreement, and continued that, for Thatcher, 'nuclear weapons are almost a blessing. She thinks the USSR is a real threat. How much bias and anti-Communist grudge can be felt from an opinion so detached from reality!'[32] *Mladá fronta*'s conclusion was similar. 'We can hardly consider it a new way of thinking', was its assessment of the UK's security position.[33] Its edition of 3 April summarised the comments of an Anglophone Soviet apparatchik, who had presented a critique of Thatcher's Cold War policy on British television. The article summarised his claims: that the Soviet people were 'appalled' by Thatcher's attitude; that if both the USA and the USSR followed her approach the result would be a 'catastrophe'; and that President Reagan was 'more forward-looking' than Thatcher, even if his methods were faulty.[34] The final opinion piece on

the visit, written almost a week after its conclusion by Ivana Štěpánková for *Mladá fronta*, reiterated the motif of Thatcher the captive of nuclear deterrence. Štěpánková declared that Czechoslovakia had a role to play in achieving a gradual change of attitude in the West; she then made a rare Czech reference to Thatcher's appearance on Soviet television, which merely stated that it confirmed that 'she is not ready to be a partner in this new way of political thinking'. Like many other Western politicians, Štěpánková grumbled, Thatcher did not understand 'new thinking'.[35]

'A Much-Needed Example': Thatcher after 1989

In mid-September 1990 Thatcher visited Prague and Bratislava. In stark contrast to her diminished popularity in Britain, the prime minister was enthusiastically received by both public and politicians in Czechoslovakia. 'Applause for the Prime Minister' ran a headline in *Lidové noviny*, reporting on the rapturous reception for Thatcher's address to the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly.[36] Thatcher's Czech admirers would continue their 'applause' in the following years, as her personality and policies were radically reappraised to suit the changing circumstances. The domestic political context was the burgeoning political Right, which rapidly mobilised to occupy to a large extent the discursive vacuum left by the departing Communists. Another factor was Thatcher's image as an outspoken critic of Communism and advocate of the powerless majority and the dissident minority of citizens living under Communism: this has been central to her appeal in a Czech context from the 1990s down to contemporary times. There were also concrete connections between Thatcher's government and the new democratic leadership, by way of state visits and UK government-initiated investment and expertise-sharing programmes. Finally, there were changes in the post-1989 Czech press, which, as we have seen, rapidly loosened itself from the shackles of Communist Party orthodoxy. Ultimately, whether a journalist wrote for *Dnes*, *Lidové noviny* or even the left-wing *Rudé právo*, Thatcher embodied a range of appealing principles and characteristics – including commitment to the free market, forceful leadership, staunch opposition to Soviet-backed Communist rule and benevolence towards the Czechs – which ensured that she was accorded a special position as an avatar of good governance and ethics.

The cult of Thatcher was advanced in the reporting of her fall from power, which was presented as a coup. On 23 November 1990 *Dnes* included on its front page an opinion piece by journalist and centrist political commentator Viliam Buchert, claiming that Thatcher's troubles had started when 'some' MPs expressed a desire for a change of leader ('uneasiness', it was explained, was an 'everyday companion of the Conservatives'). The breaking point came when cabinet members threatened to resign, culminating in Thatcher's self-sacrifice for the sake of her party. Buchert ended with the declaration that her departure 'is to the detriment of Britain and the whole of Europe' before finishing in English, '*Good luck, Mrs Thatcher*'.[37] *Dnes* identified Michael Heseltine as the man who 'eliminated the Iron Lady' and 'the multimillionaire … behind the fall of Margaret Thatcher',[38] while the same newspaper framed Thatcher as the victim of a plot, 'mostly [by] young men who sensed an opportunity to stand up against the authoritative boss'.[39]

As her premiership ended, Czech reflections on Thatcher and Thatcherism were distinctly favourable. Buchert's report is typical: Thatcher was the 'most successful politician of the post-war period. Her influence was evident not only in all spheres of British life but all around the world'.[40] Similarly, *Lidové noviny* rehearsed her record-breaking success in elections and asserted that she 'changed Britain beyond any recognition'.[41] It noted that among Thatcher's greatest achievements was her breaking of the trade unions which were described as being more powerful than the parliamentary opposition.[42] Reference was made in *Dnes* to Britain's 'economic growth in the 1980s' and to how Thatcher had 'rescued Britain' in that decade'.[43] Even *Rudé právo* asserted that she had 'strengthened Britain's international position', 'made Britain great again' and 'helped to repair the British economy'.[44] Thatcher's leadership style was praised; and traits which were derided in the 1980s, such as her direct style and stubbornness, were now portrayed as attractive and helpful.[45] *Lidové noviny* averred that she 'was always respected internationally because she always went straight to the point, clearly and directly'.[46]

In terms of her foreign policy, there was consensus that Thatcher had played a major part in the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. Before her September 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia, Jiří Rohan's detailed profile of Thatcher affirmed that opposition to Communism and championing of democracy and liberalism had been

the guiding principles of her foreign policy: Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution had been a vindication of these principles. Thatcher was presented as a benevolent influence on Czechoslovakia, with a long-term interest in the country's efforts at building democracy.[47] After her resignation *Lidové noviny* reflected that through her 'highly-principled attitude towards totalitarian regimes she contributed to the victory of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe where she will be missed'.[48] According to Ivana Štěpánková (now a Washington correspondent for *Dnes*), Thatcher made a crucial contribution to ending the Cold War by understanding and encouraging the reformist Gorbachev – a striking *volte-face* from the same journalist's analysis of the 1987 Moscow meeting.[49]

Thatcher's resignation and the passing of power to John Major was a major preoccupation for Czech journalists and commentators. She was widely commended for her political nous and integrity. Štěpánková's extended report for *Dnes* was headlined 'Maggie leaves with honour'; it portrayed a great leader who had chosen the right moment to leave: 'She can retire with her head held high'.[50] *Rudé právo* concurred, calling her decision 'statesmanlike'.[51] The manner in which the transition to Major was handled was described by *Lidové noviny* as 'dignified and civilised.'[52] Interest in Thatcher's fall seems to have had particular resonance in a Czech context. Then-president Václav Havel was quoted in the press expressing his approval of Thatcher's decision. He called it a 'fair, sporting act' and stated his wish to one day step down from high office in the 'same sporting manner'.[53] That the Czechs could learn about democracy from Thatcher's example was advanced in Jiří Leschtina's London report for *Dnes*. For Leschtina, the episode was less about Thatcher's decision to resign than the effective, and entirely peaceful, exercise of the popular will. He then made the connection with his own country explicit. Ruminating on Thatcher's career, he concluded: 'Isn't her career, including the dignified and timely termination of it, a much-needed example for our prenatal democracy, that firm but fair and democratic policy-making is possible?'[54]

Thatcher's exemplary image can also be observed in the coverage of her visit to Prague in 1999, where she accepted the highest state honour (for her role in undermining Soviet Communism) and unveiled a statue of Winston Churchill outside the British embassy. The speech at the unveiling ceremony exhorted the Czechs to 'cheer up!' and continue their pursuit of greater liberty and prosperity. Despite its overtones

of the 'preachy' style alluded to in a Czech newspaper nine years earlier,[55] the speech and Thatcher were feted. A decade after 1989, it was a timely reminder of the significance of the Czech achievement from a 'recognised heroine of the end of the Cold War', in *Lidové noviny*'s words.[56] Thatcher's speech was the subject of a lengthy reflection by Pavel Tigrid in *Dnes*. Tigrid, who had recently served in the Klaus government as minister for culture, had previously been a long-term exile who had left Czechoslovakia for France in 1948. He offered an interpretation of the 'cheer up!' speech that stayed true to the original meaning while using a good deal of poetic licence:

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> All of you Czechs, Moravians and Silesians, buck up! Stop your whining! Be optimistic! Don't underestimate yourselves! Don't belittle the most important thing that you've gained – your freedom … It is up to you to choose to identify yourselves with this newly free country. The chances and preconditions for it seem good. Take advantage of them. Use the new democratic tools that you've been given to effect change and remove the structures you no longer find agreeable. Cheer up and live happily in peace and freedom.[57]

Almost a decade after Leschtina's comments on Thatcher's resignation, Tigrid's version of the 1999 speech shows that Thatcher remained a potent device for Czech commentators attempting to plot the nation's political future.

Thatcher's 1999 visit was of particular significance for the Czech Right. Addressing the UK Conservative party conference in 1995, the then-premier Klaus declared that his government's 'own approach has been founded on principles very close to British Conservatism. We have been directly influenced by it … We have been inspired by your example and your long tradition and we hope that our experiences with dismantling Communism and building up of a free society will, in turn, be inspiration for yourselves'.[58] By 1999 Klaus was in no position to express such a sentiment. In the 1998 parliamentary elections the Social Democratic Party secured a majority while the Communist Party made major gains. Thatcher's visit was thus regarded as a fillip to an ailing Right. An article in *Lidové noviny* the day after the statue speech noted that Thatcher was 'pouring new hope' into conservative Czech politicians (she met with Klaus during her stay in Prague).[59]

Yet the same article ultimately struck a pessimistic note, and serves as a bellwether for developing Czech perceptions of Thatcher and

Thatcherism. In contrast to Klaus's 1995 speech, *Lidové noviny* affirmed that 'Parallels between British Conservatives and the ODS are, naturally, limited'; this was above all because the ODS lacked the Tories' 'political will and resolve' to effect major change. Thatcher's resignation and the transfer of the leadership was also recalled and compared unfavourably with the Czech Right, which had failed to produce a challenger to the unassailable Klaus: 'Thatcher stands for political loyalty, and also replaceability, which is something Czech elites still need to realise'.[60] That Thatcher could serve as a mirror to reflect the shortcomings of Czech national politics was elaborated on in an article in the news magazine *Respekt* by Jan Macháček, a veteran anti-Communist turned prominent journalistic critic of Klaus's economic reforms.[61] In a piece which complemented Tigrid's article in *Dnes*, Macháček used the substance of Thatcher's speech at Prague Castle on the occasion of her receiving the Order of the White Lion to pass a scathing judgement on the Czech political establishment. He fulminated against the prevalence of corruption, the lack of political openness and the perversion by politicians of the rule of law. Nevertheless, Macháček concluded that Thatcher's visit demonstrated that there was room for optimism. Leaders such as Thatcher showed that 'it is possible to change the world by being politically stubborn, brave in promoting ideals and selfless'.[62] By the end of the 1990s, therefore, Thatcher and Thatcherism adopted an ambivalent position in Czech discourse: as an inspiration and endorsement of the Czech transition to democracy, but also as an ideal standard with which to compare (sometimes unfavourably) the nation's political leaders.

'The Churchill of our Times': Remembering Thatcher in 2013

As the news of Thatcher's death broke on 8 April 2013 the tabloid *Blesk* proclaimed, 'Great Britain is in tears. The Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher (died aged 87) has gone to heaven'; it called her Britain's 'beloved politician'.[63] Beyond the tabloids, reaction was less crude but the sentiment similar. Three extended articles exemplify this: political scientist Alexander Tomský's front-page article for *Lidové noviny* titled 'The only man in the cabinet';[64] Hynek Fajmon's 'Thatcher? The Churchill of our times'[65] (also in *Lidové noviny*); and journalist Jiří Sobotka's six-

page obituary for *Respekt* magazine headlined 'Butch lady Margaret Thatcher'.[66]

Given their backgrounds, it was likely that Tomský, a conservative who resided in Britain, and Fajmon, an ODS member and a Eurosceptic MEP, would both recall Thatcher positively. Tomský selected the miners' strike among other examples when highlighting Thatcher's steely resolve, and identified the 'right to buy' scheme as an example of how Thatcher had improved the British economy. He proceeded to defend Thatcher's 'no such thing as society' remark, before claiming that she destroyed the snobbish oligarchy of the English public school network within British politics, replacing it with a meritocracy. Fajmon's piece was the most detailed of several comparisons between Thatcher and Churchill.[67] Fajmon averred that while Churchill had saved Europe from Nazism, Thatcher helped rid Europe of socialism, promoting democracy in its place. For Fajmon, the key motif of Thatcher's career was her contribution to 'freedom' in Britain and beyond. His article concluded: 'Thatcher is a symbol of the conservative revolution and Western civilisation's crucial turn of direction in the second half of the twentieth century. That is why she already occupies an esteemed position in the pantheon of greats that Britain has given to the world'. (Much of the tone of Fajmon's encomia was echoed in an article by Tomáš Ježek, the minister for privatisation in the early 1990s, who claimed that Thatcher could always identify the 'true golden kernels of our Euroamerican civilisation … She knew exactly what is evil and what is good'.[68]) Jiří Sobotka's article credited Thatcher with arresting British decline and guiding the country to prosperity and enhanced status. The most sober of the authors, Sobotka revealed that Thatcher's premiership contributed to a long period of Conservative unpopularity and the rise of New Labour, but his piece ended on an almost wistful note, as he compared the 'decline' of the West in 2013 with the position of Britain in the 1970s, before concluding 'it is easy to guess how [Thatcher] would deal with it' – though no elucidation was offered.

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There was space for criticism. The Leftist *Právo* carried quotes from socialist Czech politicians identifying anti-social or financially irresponsible aspects of Thatcherism – including drawing a link between 1980s deregulation and the 2008 global financial crisis. *Právo* also mentioned Thatcher's support for authoritarian regimes; likewise, the obituary

in *Respekt*, acknowledged that 'in other parts of the world', Thatcher's closeness to General Pinochet and her condemnation of Nelson Mandela damaged her reputation.[69] The editor of the Left-leaning online portal *Deník referendum* authored a balanced summary of Thatcher's life which, rarely for a Czech publication, commented on how 'masterfully' she had used 'spin doctor and public relations' techniques to enhance her appeal.[70] Meanwhile, Jan Macháček, whom it was previously noted had taken inspiration from Thatcher in 1999 for her idealism and selflessness, now adopted a contrarian position on Thatcher's legacy, arguing that, far from representing any universal ideal in terms of political approach, Thatcher had simply been 'in the right place at the right time'.[71] However, the conservative press was notably disinclined to criticise. *Dnes*, for example, dismissed hostile British commentators as 'left-wingers and people from the regions': it reminded readers that Thatcher had won three successive elections and was therefore regarded by most British people as a successful politician.[72]

Thatcher's close links with, and continued relevance in, the Czech lands was another prominent aspect. *Hospodářské noviny* journalist Petr Fischer went so far as to announce that Thatcher's death ought to prompt the Czech nation to begin reassessing the entire post-1989 resettlement.[73] There were widespread laudations for her role in the fall of Communism, including in *Právo*, and for the personal interest she showed in British-based Czech dissidents.[74] Fajmon claimed her appeal was more universal: 'for us Czechs during the 1980s', he wrote, 'we told ourselves that she must be a really courageous woman, when she is so feared by the comrades in the Kremlin, who through TASS created the nickname "Iron Lady" in order to damage her.'[75] Thatcher's role in the post-1989 transition in Czechoslovakia was elaborated upon in a lengthy article in *Lidové noviny* entitled 'Reform hurts, she warned the Czechs'. It recalled Thatcher's 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia, characterising her as a sage with precious advice on economic restructuring for the 'Thatcherite' Klaus.[76] Sobotka gave due attention to Thatcher's influence on Klaus and the ODS, but also showed how other Czech politicians from both Right and Left (including former Communists) had been inspired either by her policies or her personality and achievements.[77] Thatcher's hostility to deeper European integration was also touched on approvingly in several articles – surely reflecting the largely unenthusiastic Czech attitude towards EU membership.[78] Fajmon listed her opposition to deeper union among her 'greatest merits'; Tomský

credited her with foreseeing the economic and political dangers of a more united Europe.[79]

But Thatcher and Thatcherism were also invoked by critics of post-1989 Czech developments. A thoughtful article in *Hospodářské noviny* by Petr Fischer strove to identify the fundamental aspect of Thatcherism that transcended ideological divides. Fischer concluded that it consisted in Thatcher's ability to take politics from 'its ideological heights back down to earth': Thatcherite democracy was visceral, confrontational and social. According to Fischer,

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> In the Czech Republic, this legacy from the Iron Lady goes unheeded, as all local salon Thatcherites are utterly petrified of this dimension of politics. We are afraid of protests, we fear political mobilisation. We are far more comfortable with the naive and idealistic fantasy that democracy is a symbolic affair conducted on the level of language, the wounds of which don't hurt.[80]

More commonly, commentators used Thatcher as a standard against which to appraise the Czech Right, especially Klaus. Tomáš Ježek, in a guarded reference to Klaus, noted that Thatcher was firmly rooted in Great Britain and its traditions; it was this background that distinguished her from and, indeed, baffled, 'all of her imitators and venerators, even in the Czech lands', who had proved more brittle in their values and beliefs.[81] A more overt comparison with Klaus came from Pavel Bratinka. A pivotal figure in 1989, Bratinka co-founded the neo-liberal Civic Democratic Alliance; the party remained firmly in the shadow of Klaus's ODS and Bratinka left national politics in 1998.[82] In an interview with *Dnes*, Bratinka lamented that Czech governments of the 1990s had been 'socially-orientated' rather than Thatcherite; he held Klaus primarily to blame. Klaus, he maintained, had led a nation that was still excessively dependent on the state rather than practicing the self-reliance which Thatcher had preached; he had not heeded Thatcher's advice from 1990 that 'reform hurts'. Bratinka concluded that it was ultimately a question of personality: unlike Thatcher, Klaus had been unwilling to take risks. In support of this, Bratinka contrasted a Czech rail strike that lasted for two days before Klaus capitulated with, unsurprisingly, Thatcher's response to the UK miners' strike (a point echoed by Jiří Sobotka in *Respekt*).[83] For Bratinka, Thatcherism was an ideal that the Czech Right had been not just unable but unwilling to emulate.

Conclusion

Margaret Thatcher was and is a global figure; and it is surely appropriate that Thatcher historians are beginning to engage seriously with her reception and impact beyond the confines of the United Kingdom. Because of the immense changes that unfolded there in the late 1980s and 1990s, states such as Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic offer particularly revealing examples of the international dimension of Thatcher and Thatcherism. Over three decades Czech newspapers reported and reflected upon Thatcher and her policies. Seldom were the observations dispassionate and disinterested: on the contrary, the striking continuity amidst the change that the Czech lands experienced from the 1980s to the 2010s is that Czech (or Czechoslovak) journalists and commentators found in Thatcher and Thatcherite Britain useful vehicles for reflecting – often casually but sometimes profoundly – on their own state and society. In Communist times Thatcher and Thatcherism were vilified as anti-social and hypocritical; reportage of the UK miners' strike showed Thatcher's Britain, replete with Dickensian capitalism, as the opposite of the benign Czechoslovakian workers' state. The 1987 visit to Moscow again contrasted Britain with Czechoslovakia and the rest of the Warsaw Pact: the latter, under the guidance of the enlightened Gorbachev, were portrayed as pacific and progressive, while the former, under the reactionary leadership of Thatcher and Conservatives, was cast as belligerent and outdated.

After 1989 Thatcher was embraced by the Czech political elite and a cult of Thatcher became established in the press. The transformation of Thatcher's image from Communist folk-devil to liberal-democratic sage can be related to the close relationship between the Czech state and the media, as well as the rapidly changing political, ideological and economic contexts in which that relationship existed. Thatcher and her ideals, anathema in Communist times, were highly compatible with the post-1989 elite, keen to purge the state of its Communist legacy and to introduce many aspects of the Western liberal-capitalist model, just as Thatcher had seemingly purged Britain of socialism. The Czech media, largely in tune with these goals, presented Thatcher as a figure to enlighten and inspire. Meanwhile, when commenting on the specific case of Thatcher's 1990 resignation, Britain was presented as a political utopia, where democracy was deeply embedded and high-minded politicians relinquished power for the public good. Comparisons were also drawn in the post-Klaus era from the later 1990s

until Thatcher's death. Frequently, the purpose here was to evaluate the neo-liberal Klausian experiment, as well as the post-1989 settlement more generally. For some commentators, Klaus had failed precisely because he had been unwilling to fully implement Thatcherite policies and to emulate his mentor's metallic determination. Across a broad spectrum of newspapers the cult of Thatcher as the embodiment of firm but honourable politics remained entrenched; her death was the signal for much sentimental reflection and the rehashing of clichés surrounding the 'Iron Lady's' personality and achievements. In these various ways, therefore, Thatcher occupied a rare position in the Czech context: a Western leader who for over thirty years had immediate relevance in that country's political discourse. From this perspective, the somewhat hyperbolic description of Thatcher in April 2013 as 'the Churchill of our times' begins to look apposite.

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Notes

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2 We deliberately present evidence of 'Czech' responses to Thatcher and Thatcherism even for the 1980s and early 1990s, the period when the Czech lands were still united with Slovakia. This reflects the fact that even before the separation of the Czech and Slovak republics in 1993, each national group had long been served by its own set of newspapers: a truly 'Czechoslovak' newspaper service did not exist (unlike television or radio). Moreover, as several Czech newspapers from Communist times continued to operate after 1989 and 1993, it seems justifiable to confine our focus to the Czech side. See Owen V. Johnson, 'Failing Democracy: Journalists,

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