

OPPOSITION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

No real dissident movement appeared in the Czech Republic until the late Seventies: before that, attempts to oppose the regime had been sporadic and individual. In 1968, the “Prague Spring” – which had reawakened the enthusiasm of civil society – was crushed by the Soviet invasion and the “normalization” policy of the pro-Soviet first secretary Gustav Husak. At that time repression was directed above all at former party members, religious activists and intellectuals. By the mid-Seventies, the harshest crackdowns were over and the regime’s grip on power appeared absolute and undisputed. In 1974, however, thirty left-wing dissidents published the *Chilean manifesto*, in which they expressed solidarity with the opponents of Pinochet and likened his methods to those in force in Czechoslovakia; Vaclav Havel staged his adaptation of Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, immediately lambasted by the censors. On 8 April 1975, in his *Open letter to Gustav Husak*, Havel described a country in which the regime controlled every aspect of people’s lives, defining the ban on the free expression of cultural activities as “taking out an arrest warrant against culture”. In the spring of the following year 20 underground musicians were arrested, but by then the climate had changed: after the Helsinki conference on human rights and the end of the “normalization fervour” of the previous years, the artists’ trial provided opponents with the stimulus to meet and join forces.

Charter ’77 and independent circles

Solidarity with the jailed musicians gave impetus to “Charter ’77”: a document in defence of human rights – guaranteed in theory in Czechoslovakia under the Helsinki agreements – which became a common platform for the various dissident factions. To avoid repressive measures, the movement had no properly defined framework, the only official role being that of the spokesman. The authors of the document were Vaclav Havel, Pavel Kohout, Zdenek Mlynar, Jiri Nemeč, Jaroslav Koran, Vaclav Vendelin Komenda and Petr Uhl. Even before being published, on 6 January 1977, “Charter” collected 242 signatures and in the space of a year the number had risen to 600, finally reaching 1,898. The regime’s response was to search the homes of almost all the signatories, cause many of them to lose their jobs and orchestrate a scathing defamatory campaign against the movement, described as an emanation of western secret services. Following publication of the document, some of its promoters, including Havel, were arrested.

Charter ’77 could not become a mass movement: neither its basic principles nor the prevailing socio-political context would have allowed it; nevertheless, it radically changed the situation in the country. The regime demanded a demonstration of loyalty, asking the public to sign a condemnation of Charter ’77 and numerous people were sacked for failing to underwrite it or simply for asking to read the document first.

Charter ’77 encompassed different currents but this did not undermine the group’s cohesion. The spokesman – who was directly responsible for all its activities – made the movement credible and transparent. The first spokesmen were Vaclav Havel, Jiri Hajek and Jan Patočka.

An important spin-off of Charter '77 was the Committee in Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS) – formed in April 1978 – which denounced abuse and defended those involved in political trials. Committee members were subjected to ferocious repressive measures but their commitment placed limitations on the excessive power of the courts and became decisive in heightening awareness, both in Czechoslovakia and abroad, of the vicissitudes of the regime's victims.

Between the late Seventies and early Eighties, Charter '77 experienced difficult times: numerous signatories were forced to emigrate, voluntarily or otherwise, whereas Petr Uhl, Vaclav Havel, Vaclav Benda, Jiri Dienstbier and Otka Bednarova were jailed for their VONS activities. On 11 March 1985 Charter '77 published the *Prague appeal*, which resulted in a proper political formation, joined by numerous intellectuals. In the second half of the Eighties, changes in the international political situation, especially in the Soviet Union, gave Charter '77 a better defined political and social role. This prompted events in the universities, in artistic circles, among young people and in the Church. By the end of 1988, Charter '77 was the movement best able to influence public opinion, thanks also to an efficient organizational framework. In June 1989 the signatories, who gravitated around Vaclav Havel, wrote a manifesto – entitled *A few sentences* – which soon collected 30 thousand signatures, including those of famous artists who up until that moment had had no links with the dissident movement.

After the formation of the first non-Communist government in Poland, the changes taking place in Hungary and the mass exodus of East Germans from the GDR, public protests became increasingly frequent. The last major arrests of dissidents took place in October 1989. On 17 November a student demonstration was brutally quashed by the police: this was the beginning of the “Velvet revolution”.

The Churches

The crackdowns of the early Seventies only marginally affected ecclesiastic circles. Religious figures of all confessions depended on the Government Secretariat for Churches, the regime's instrument of control, which had the power to revoke permission to perform pastoral work; this explains why most churches focused on the liturgy, relinquishing all public initiatives.

The Protestant churches created their own democratic framework, electing spiritual assistants to run the parishes and guaranteeing protection for all those whose licence to perform their religious mission had been revoked; this enabled pastors to carry on living among their parishioners. Such solidarity encouraged them to undertake public initiatives and many took part in the actions of Charta'77.

The framework of the Catholic Church was different. In the Fifties it had been harshly repressed: monastic orders had been abolished and went underground, numerous priests, bishops and nuns had spent long years in jail and seminarists were assessed by the Secretariat for Churches and often recruited as collaborators of the secret police. Particularly close surveillance was directed at religious figures that had spoken out against the “Pacem in Terris” movement,

formed in the mid-Seventies by a group of priests loyal to the regime, which collaborated with the secret services to investigate religious circles. Despite the repression of the Seventies, the work done by the churches and by Catholic associations was intense: in Czech territory *samizdat* publishing was set up, meetings and seminars were organized, candidates for the priesthood studied theology and were ordained in secret, thereby giving rise to an underground Church that also included a number of bishops. Numerous lay and religious figures joined Charter '77 and suffered in prison for the initiative in defence of human rights and for their work in the *samizdat*.

In-depth study by Annalia Guglielmi