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# The revolution from the perspective of a visiting student

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## Keys to freedom: The revolution from the perspective of a visiting student

This year the Czech Republic celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution - one of the most meaningful historic events in the country. The Velvet Revolution is an unforgettable moment in Czechoslovak history. November the 17th is a date that commemorates protests against two dictatorial regimes in the past: the Nazi occupation in 1939 and the Communist regime 50 years later. The year 1989 spelled the end of oppressive regimes in what was then Czechoslovakia. Since, the country has been free and democratic.



At the time of Communist rule, the Czech Republic did not yet exist: it was founded in 1993 after a peaceful “divorce” with Slovakia, with whom Czechs still share strong ties. Czechoslovakia was under the Communist regime from 1948 to 1989 and was part of the Soviet bloc alongside Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and East Germany. The Communist regime was nothing if not oppressive: there was no place for free speech, media, or much travel. One of the darkest periods, the Stalinist 1950s, saw democrats and vocal public figures or others made into scapegoats, face trumped up charges in political show trials. Some, such as Milada Horáková, were sentenced to death. Countless others were sent to prisons or into forced labour such as in uranium mines.

### **POLITICAL THAW IN THE 1960s**

Historically, the 1960s saw a thaw after the deaths of Josef Stalin and Communist Czechoslovakia's Klement Gottwald - and the dismantling of their cults of personality. Prague, for example, had been home to the largest statue of Stalin in the world (derisively referred to as a 'meat queue') at Letná Park; it was blown up in 1962. The 1960s saw the Czechoslovak government enact liberalized political and economic reforms including greater freedom of expression for the press and the rehabilitation of the victims of political purges. This period is known as "the Prague Spring". The period of "socialism with a human face" did not last but ended in an invasion of the Soviet-led forces and occupation of the country in 1968. Reforms were rolled back and a new era of oppression, which came to be known as the Normalisation period, followed. On November 17th, 1989, students gathered in Prague to commemorate Jan Opletal, a national hero who opposed the Nazis and was shot at a demonstration in 1939 and later succumbed to his wounds. The students in 1989 had permission to march from Albertov to the national cemetery at Vyšehrad, but they went further, to the city center, voicing disapproval of the regime. The peaceful protest ended with brutal violence from the riot police: 600 students were among the many injured. Nevertheless, police violence did not stop them and the next day they went on strike with theatre actors: this is how the Velvet Revolution started. Earlier, on November 9th, the Berlin Wall which separated West Berlin from East Germany, fell; Poland and Hungary were also on the path of democracy. Later on, in 1991, the USSR collapsed.

### **THE SOUND OF KEYS SPELLED THE END OF THE REGIME**

Nowadays, the countries of the former Soviet bloc or Warsaw Pact still remember their past experiences by celebrating the end of the Communist era. In the Czech Republic, one of main symbols of freedom and democracy are sets of keys. The sound of the jangling keys is a metaphor that describes the end of the communism. This year, 21,000 keys were distributed among people by the H21 Institute non-profit: "We always need to fight for democracy. As Václav Havel said "Truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred'," says Petr Bouška, a member of H21 promoting democracy in the Czech Republic.



### **THIRTY YEARS ON**

This year the celebration was spirited. A student march was planned from Albertov to Národní třída. Many children, adults and elder people carried Czechs flags. You could feel the spirit of a celebration in the air. "It is a special day for students. Thirty years ago, people were fighting against injustice, and now it is a historical moment. I realize that 30 years ago the conditions were different, and it is unusual" Honza, a CU student, says. He and his companions believe that it is crucial to remember and celebrate these events. This is because of the critical political situation, "some people worry that democracy is in danger," comments Tomasz, another CU student. This day is still important for the younger generations, "I was not born at the time it was happening but, as a Czech citizen, I feel delighted. We have not been free for many years but now we are liberated. I think we reached the goal," says Danusha, a student. Some students believe that commemoration is vital to remember that the previous generations made huge efforts and took enormous risks for the Czech Republic to be free. It is a developed country, an EU and NATO member and is considered one of the safest countries in Europe.

**Valerie Stupnikova** has been studying journalism in Prague within the Erasmus programme. She contributed a number of stories to Forum over the course of the winter semester.

If you are an Erasmus student with some experience in journalism or creative writing and would be interested in writing a story for us, let us know at +420 224 491 248.

**Edited by Jan Velinger**

