

Vaclev Havel on Responsibility and Democracy

With startling rapidity, Communist control over the countries of Eastern Europe crumbled away during 1989 and 1990. One of the countries that reestablished democratic government in the period was Czechoslovakia, which had been under Communist rule since 1948.

In 1968, Czech leaders had tried to establish a more democratic form of government, but Soviet troops led an invasion to block the changes. Soviet leaders and their Eastern European allies succeeded in restoring hard-line Czechoslovak Communists to power.

At the time of the 1968 events, Vaclav Havel (VAHT-slahff HAH-vul) was a playwright who took an active part in reform efforts. After 1968, his plays ridiculing Communist Party officials and exploring moral issues drew unfavorable attention from the authorities, and his works were banned. Havel became a prominent spokesperson for human rights, which drew even more government attention. He spent four years in prison for his activities. In 1989, as democratic reforms began in other nations of Eastern Europe, Czechoslovaks took to the streets in mass demonstrations. Havel was among the protest leaders. Bowing to popular pressure, in December 1989, the Communist government agreed to form a coalition government with the opposition. By this “peaceful revolution,” democracy returned to Czechoslovakia.

Havel was chosen as acting president until binding elections could be held later. On January 1, 1990, three days after taking office, he addressed the nation (or, as he says, “nations”—the Czech and Slovak peoples). These excerpts are from his address.

For forty years on this day you heard, from my predecessors, variations on the same theme: how our country flourished, how many million tons of steel we produced, how happy we all were, how we trusted our government, and what bright [prospects] were unfolding before us.

I assume you did not propose me for this office so that I too, would lie to you.

Our country is not flourishing. The enormous creative and spiritual potential of our nations is not being used sensibly. Entire branches of industry are producing goods that are of no interest to anyone, while we are lacking the things we need. A state that calls itself a workers’ state humiliates and exploits workers. Our [out-of-date] economy [wastes] what little energy we have available. A country once proud of its educational standards now spends so little on education that it ranks seventy-second in the world. We have contaminated [poisoned] the soil, rivers, and forests [left] to use by our ancestors, and today we have the most polluted environment in Europe. Adults in our country die earlier than [do adults] in most other European countries....

But all this is still not the main problem. The worst thing is that we live in a contaminated moral environment. We feel morally ill because we got used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore each other, to care only for ourselves. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility, and forgiveness lost their depth and dimensions, and for many of us they came to represent only psychological peculiarities, or to resemble long-lost greetings from ancient times, a little ridiculous in the era of computers and spaceships. Only a few of us were able to cry aloud that the powers that be ought not to be all-powerful...The previous regime—armed with its arrogant and intolerant ideology—reduced man to a force of production and nature to a tool of production...It reduced gifted and [independent] people to nuts and bolts of some

monstrously huge, noisy, and stinking machine, whose real meaning is not clear to anyone. It could do no more than slowly but [relentlessly] wear itself out, along with its nuts and bolts.

When I talk about contaminated moral atmosphere, I am not talking just about the gentlemen [who once ruled]. I am talking about all of us. We had all become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unalterable fact of life, and thus we helped to [keep] it [going]. In other words, we are all—though naturally to differing extents—responsible for the operation of totalitarian machinery. None of us is just its victim: we are all also its co-creators.

Why do I say this? It would be quite unreasonable to understand the sad [inheritance] of the last forty years as something alien, something [left] to us by some distant relative. On the contrary, we must accept this legacy as a sin we committed against ourselves. If we accept it as such, we will understand that it is up to us all, and up to us alone, to do something about it. We cannot blame the previous rulers for everything, not only because it would be untrue but also because it could blunt the duty each of us faces today, that is, the obligation to act independently, freely, reasonably, and quickly. Let us make no mistake: the best government in the world, the best parliament, and the best president in the world cannot achieve much on their own. And it would also be wrong to expect a general remedy to come from them alone. Freedom and democracy require participation and therefore responsible action from us all.

If we realize this, then all the horrors the new Czechoslovak democracy has inherited will cease to appear so terrible. If we realize this, hope will return to our hearts...

On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia peacefully divided into two countries—the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Havel had opposed the split. He was later elected president of the Czech Republic.

Review Questions

1. Why did Vaclav Havel use the plural “nations” in his New Year’s address?
2. Why did Havel feel that Czechoslovak citizens had become “morally ill”?
3. What challenge did Havel make to the people of Czechoslovakia?
4. How did Czechoslovakia change on January 1, 1993?