Posters of the 1989 Velvet Revolution

át všechna pražská divadla **momentum**

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Informace CTK

Freedom, Space and the Public

What is the public? It's usually an abstract word – a term media strategists operate with. Only in rare moments does it transform into a visible and tangible reality. It becomes body and word, actor and medium. The last time this happened was in November 1989. Hundreds of thousands of people filled public spaces – the courtyards between factory halls, stadiums, plains, streets, squares. Thousands of signs appeared on shop windows, walls, poles and trams. The civic element and democratic speech conquered the public space, long occupied by communist power. The old regime was defeated by an invasion of bodies and words. Several slogans peeled away from the semantic explosion, slogans which gave the cataclysmic motion absolute sense. They became the icons and symbols which radiated the collective will.

Spring 68 / Fall 89 – Turning the number 68 upside down on an imaginary astronomical clock at fateful intervals creates the number 89. The clever play on the situation expresses the completion of the interrupted revolution and the achievement of historic satisfaction.

Civic Forum – Space For Everyone – The slogan brings to mind the Civic Forum's massive initial power, but also its later fatal weakness. An attempt at a different kind of politics – nonpartisan and civic, in which each person would be responsible for their acts - was the last utopian project.

End Single-Party Government – Free Elections – The most frequently-chanted slogan created a unanimous will among the awakened public and the core of the OF programme. Today, democracy is a routine operation and elections are a necessary civic minimum. It has ceased to be a holiday.

Truth and Love Must Prevail Over Lies and Hatred - The exclamation which presidential candidate Václav Havel used to climax his speech on 10 December 1989. It was a call to moral straightening – "against violence, filth, intrigue, lawlessness, mafias, privileges and persecutions." Later it was an easy target for sarcastic invective brought on by the post-communist hangover and embarrassment about the fervor of the time.

Back to Europe – An expression of an unequivocal will to return to the luxurious Western European motorway after an unbearably long detour on Eastern Europe's broken third-class highways. The Czechs' consumerist dream was fulfilled, but does European identity mean anything else to them?

What was the role of the Czechoslovak public at the end of 1989? The crowds on the streets expressed an unpredictable sense of political reality, spiced with imaginative humour. They did not give in to their fury and become an angry mob. The large tension at the start quickly transformed into unrestrained glee – the carnival of the revolution. After the long years of totalitarian discipline, people experienced the triumphal feeling of retaking the public space. Later, the somewhat extravagant whirl of a liberated society contrasted sharply with the bitter sobering up into a post-communist reality. Nevertheless, the dream of freedom, space and the public at the end of 1989 was powerful, exciting and inspiring.

– Jiří Suk

Posters that changed our lives

When the communist regimes of Eastern Europe started to be toppled in 1989, we anxiously awaited the day when the regime would fall here as well. The end of the year was nearing and we lived in the conviction that the totalitarian government would survive into 1990.

But then came Friday, November 17, one of the many antigovernment demonstrations Prague witnessed in the course of 1989. There was something different in the air at that demonstration, as if people were not as fearful, and perhaps that is why my parents took me along with them. This was one week after the Berlin Wall fell and just days after Agnes of Bohemia was canonized. This time, though, the brutally-suppressed demonstration did not fall on deaf ears; over the weekend a huge number of civic groups were formed, people wrote letters expressing their anger with the police's bloody aggression, strike organisations were formed in schools and theatres, and finally on Sunday, the Civic Forum was established as the platform for holding discussions with government officials.

One of the Civic Forum's key problems was how to inform the public about what was happening. The government-controlled television and radio stations provided censored, distorted or entirely fallacious information (as captured in a popular slogan about the truth of television broadcasts and reports in Rudé právo [Red Truth], the communist party newspaper). The national newspaper Svobodné slovo [Free Word] – did bravely decide to provide uncensored information, but entire print runs were liquidated and copies of the newspaper hardly made it outside of Prague.

As a result, political posters took centre stage. Students and famous actors took trips to the rest of the country together, visiting factories and informing employees about the students beaten on Národní třída in Prague and the daily anti-government demonstrations being held. At the same time, they plastered posters in Czech and Slovak cities and distributed fliers and independent newspapers. The façade of Czechoslovakia's communist grey and dilapidated cities were transformed into a huge, bright, poster-speckled space.

Initially, most posters, banners and signs out on the streets were made by hand, but printed posters soon appeared. In that short period until the end of 1989, an estimated 20 memorable and well-made posters were created by professional artists as well as unknown amateurs. Posters were distributed out of the Mánes Gallery in Prague, where I spent my evenings as a student helping out with whatever was needed.

And it is precisely at this place where, 20 years ago, this collection was created. Posters from the "Velvet" revolution have never been exhibited together since then.

The posters are remarkable for the diversity of style they exhibit, from purely typographical layouts and work with photographs to linocuts and lithographs. Some posters were created in haste: Král had just a couple of hours to create his blunt poster *Konec vlády* jedné strany! [End Single Party Rule!]; others, such as Cihlář's Christmas linocut were perfectly executed right down to the tiniest details. In terms of impact, the posters differ from one another considerably: whereas Rittstein, Tomík and Jiránek use caricatures to comment on



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current events, the poster **Zpět do Evropy** [Back to Europe], whose author is unknown, and the collective work *Havel na Hrad* [Havel to the Castle], the traditional seat of Czech presidents, look to the future and outline a vision of the direction the next government should take. Najbrt's poster, the only in the entire collection to reflect contemporary tendencies in Western European typography, is also

Although it is difficult to look for a link between the posters on exhibit, when viewing the entire collection, certain conclusions can be drawn. First and foremost, the entire series documents the fact that even though Czechoslovakia was a totalitarian-run country in cultural isolation, Czech artists maintained their ability to think freely and proved they can find the means to adequately express a situation that neither their schooling nor their experience had prepared them for: To freely express fundamental ideas. Some posters were very successful: Havel's colour portrait, created by an unknown artist, was ubiquitous and many recall the poster to this day; other posters in the collection have been long forgotten, even by the very artists who

Although I took great care in looking for the artists, I was unable to find out whom all of the artists are and it is possible that in some cases the witnesses I spoke with have not recalled everything cor-

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The Improbable Becomes Possible

In the public space, posters are perceived as functional communication; most are created to order, whether the client is an advertising agency or any institution. In extraordinary historical situations - in the Czech lands in 1968 and 1989 – street graphics emerged spontaneously on a rising wave of desire to change conditions. Anonymous as well as professional graphic creativity burst forth from a shared idealistic vision, one whose goal was to sensitise society so that it believes that the "improbable becomes possible" and makes it happen.

This private collection of posters from the intensive weeks of the "Velvet Revolution" concentrates a fragment of that graphic creativity, is heterogenous in essence, and precisely for that reason is immensely rich as an iconographic source. We can read it from the point of view of Rolland Barthes, who understands poster exhibitions as a demonstration of semantic phenomena, social structures, and a repertoire of standpoints.

Jiří Suk touches on the semantics of the essential slogans in another text here. Let us therefore take notice of their importance. Informational readiness is followed by action readiness. One of the first printed posters calls for a general strike, and the dynamism of Karel Čapek's hand-drawn lettering as well as the detail of the flag today recalls the atmosphere of time pressure felt then, when every minute was decisive for future power arrangements. Additional action posters agitate for participation in elections and advocate Václav Havel for president. Of these, the powerful optical shortcut in the poster by Rostislav Vaněk stands out. Not only rational political slogans, but also emotive icons immediately supported the effectiveness of communication. A singular, simple and emotionally effective message on a change in atmosphere was imparted by the Civic Forum symbol, which seems to have paraphrased Jaroslav Hutka's protest song, which said that "a smiling face is the most beautiful thing." Citizens immediately identified with this direct icon, just as with the symbol of a heart, which appears in connection with the Civic Forum as well as in Václav Havel's signature.

Information about the social structure of the Velvet Revolution. which we can read from the collection of posters, raises the leading role of students and dissidents, as well as the importance of masses of people. Pravda zvítězí [Truth Will Prevail], the poster by Bratrstvo [Brotherhood], is at first glance an impassioned portrait of student vehemence, but it hides multiple layers of meaning and anticipates the vulnerability of the Velvet Revolution. We find many authors of revolutionary graphics among students – Pavel Šťastný, the author of the Civic Forum logo, was at the time a fresh first-year student at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design. The poster General *Strike* was printed at the State Graphic School, as is presented on the poster, and this information as well also played an important role in the atmosphere of caution at the time. Václav Havel, a symbol of dissent, appears on Cihlář's poster with another iconic figure, Pavel Landovský, and the terse information on the date and exact time becomes emotional data. Cihlář's linoleum cut Christmas poster situates Jesus' birth on a square, into peoples' hustle and bustle, where

many everyday events play out simultaneously, including revolutionary ones.

From the repertoire of standpoints we select postmodern approaches working with game strategy, multiple layers of communication and a rich network of guotations. The angular shapes of the numerals and crystalline rhombuses on Aleš Najbrt's **68/89** poster make reference to architectural cubism, which was perceived in the 1980s as a specifically Czech cultural value with global reach. On the poster of the Radost student agency, the five-pointed star, a symbol of socialism, becomes part of a new non-ideological paradigm, a happy and playful star in an open galactic space.

Today we perceive posters from 1989 as an aesthetic phenomenon, strongest where they approach authentic artistic expression of happenings and action art, but also contemporary experiences with street art. This unique collection of posters from 1989 provides information and especially evokes memories, emotions and experiences, because spontaneous impulsive creative power prevails over the conceptual.

– Iva Knobloch





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