
A Revealing Journey to Bratislava in 1967

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In the summer of 1967 I was invited to join a delegation of American anti-Vietnam war activists to attend a meeting in Bratislava, where we were to be met by Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, one of the top officials of the National Liberation Front, and a group of North Vietnamese government officials and leaders of various organisations in the north. I was then at the beginning of my academic career, teaching sociology at the University of Chicago. Five years earlier, I'd been part of the group that founded the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the organisational spearhead of the American New Left. SDS, in 1965, had mobilised the first national demonstrations against the Vietnam war. The Bratislava delegation (numbering about 30) was a cross-section of the leadership of anti-war resistance in the US: civil rights activists, student radicals, feminist organisers, clergy, academics, journalists. The meeting had been arranged by Tom Hayden and Dave Dellinger representing the US peace movement and a North Vietnamese US-Vietnam Peace organisation. The meeting was hosted by the official Czechoslovak peace bureaucracy.

When we arrived in Bratislava we found ourselves in a modernistic labour conference centre overlooking the Danube. The town had been badly damaged by bombing and other effects of war during World War II, effects still obvious in 1967.

Meeting with the Vietnamese, of course, had a considerable impact on all of us. It became clear that the message they wanted to convey to the American peace movement was that our emphasis on the Vietnamese people as victims of the war starkly contrasted with their own view, which was that they were effectively resisting the military onslaught of the United States. They had defeated the French in 1954 and they were going to defeat the United States.

That was the message. We found it hard to accept, since the United States was the world's supreme military power and had atomic weapons, if necessary, as a resort.

Their claim that they were going to defeat the United States was not, I felt, simply romantic bravado. They argued that they were able to defeat the American military because they were engaged in guerrilla warfare, which the Ameri-

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cans could not suppress. The more that the United States introduced troops and escalated the size of its presence, the more the Vietnamese people would unite against us. They described particular tactics that would be effective in hamstringing the American effort—tactics that relied on the cooperation of the peasant people who were the base of Vietnamese society.

We didn't realise then that the import of this meeting, in part, was to prepare us for the Tet Offensive, which was to occur six months later. Tet demonstrated some of the truth that the Vietnamese were declaring—namely, that they could launch a military action that would seriously damage the United States' ability to wage the war militarily. The ultimate defeat, they predicted, would come because the American public would see that victory was not possible—just as the French people had decided in 1954. That prediction turned out to be valid.

For me, an important dimension of the experience in Bratislava was the opportunity to encounter Czechoslovakia. Our Czechoslovak communist hosts had arranged a variety of official events that were possibly intended to divert us from that objective. One evening we were taken to the Opera House for a performance of *La Traviata*. This might have been a treat under ordinary tourist experience—but for me it was a waste of precious time.

During the first intermission, a couple of us went outside for some air. There in the Opera Square was a huge throng of young people—the square was a gathering place for the many students of Bratislava. I declared rather loudly how great it would be if someone here spoke English. That attracted the attention of a young man, Tomáš, who spun around and greeted us warmly in English. We quickly established that he was a very cosmopolitan guy who had travelled widely and knew something about the world. He offered to show us around town a bit, which we, of course, were eager to do. We went on a walk and passed the Culture Palace, a refurbished old building on the riverbank, where we heard the sounds of a rock band. Tomáš took us inside to what turned out to be a rehearsal space for one of many rock groups in the cultural underground of Bratislava. They were singing in English, although they didn't know the language.

We learned that, in this highly controlled society, a youth culture with strong interests in what was happening in the West was flourishing. The musicians invited us to their 'cave' and, fascinated and mystified, we followed them. It turned out that they had a clubhouse in the cellar of a bombed-out building. We had to crawl through a tunnel to get to this room. The cave was illuminated by a green light bulb and was plastered with Beatles posters. Their interest in the Beatles—and all things Western—was poignantly coupled with a gesture of welcome. They immediately passed around bread and salt, explaining it as a traditional Slavic way to welcome guests.

They had a tape recording that they wanted us to hear. It was a tape of the Beatles' new album—which we had not yet heard. They had just recorded it off Radio Luxembourg, which at that time was broadcasting into Eastern Europe music that was otherwise unavailable there. That's how I first heard *Sergeant Pepper*.

We talked about our opposition to the draft and the war in Vietnam, and they shared that opposition, because the war, they thought, was diverting resources from the needs of the Czechoslovak people. They wanted it to be over, as much as we did, but for somewhat different reasons. They were hungry for the opportunity to travel, but I was surprised that they weren't especially eager to come to the United States. They seemed more enthusiastic about Scandinavia, seeing it as a place that represented an attractive societal alternative to them. Another surprising political theme was their strong belief that the world had gone downhill since Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy were gone. They wanted to know who we thought had killed Kennedy, and they somehow coupled that assassination with the death of the Beatles' manager Brian Epstein. Despite the fog of controlled media, these kids were forging a countercultural sensibility, literally underground. Something challenging to the status quo was fermenting there as well as in our own world.

Several months later, Czechoslovakia exploded in rebellion. Our encounter with Tomáš and the rock band had given us an advance glimpse of the Prague Spring. My immediate sense, after the conversation in the 'cave', was that the apparent solidity of a severely authoritarian and repressive regime was an illusion. When Slovakia split from Czechoslovakia, twenty years later, and declared its independence, I recalled that one of the main threads of our cellar conversation had to do with a discontent rooted in Slovak nationalism. 'Freedom' for the young musicians meant freedom for expression and personal opportunity, but they also spoke about national autonomy.

Our guide that evening, Tomáš, provided his own intriguing insights into youth consciousness. Early in the evening, he wanted to assure us that he understood that the 'Negro problem' in America was trumped up by Communist Party propaganda and that, anyway, Slovaks and Czechs could understand it because, he said, 'We have to deal with our gypsies'. We, of course, sat him down and lectured him about the reality of racism in the United States. We understood, however, that his remarks were not simply an expression of his own unexamined racism but reflected resistance to official propaganda—whatever 'they' say must be the opposite of truth.

My own experience with communist bureaucracy during our time in Bratislava also gave me glimpses of its character. Indeed, from the outset, it was evident that our Vietnamese counterparts had considerable contempt for the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

On the first day of the conference, we were taken to Bratislava's old town hall, where various city officials delivered lengthy and empty speeches to us. Since that was the first morning I had ever been in a European city, I was restless, and decided to take a stroll. Leaving the official gathering was not, apparently, acceptable behaviour. After walking a block or so, I felt a hand taking my arm, and it was a short Vietnamese guy, who I was to get to know well. He was Do Oanh Xuan, one of the key interpreters for the Vietnamese delegation. I later learned

that virtually every American who went to North Vietnam had close encounters with him. He was in fact in charge of the North Vietnam Peace Committee. As we strolled, Oanh asked me why I thought we were taken to the old town hall, and I said I had no idea. He explained: 'Well, that is the place where Napoleon signed a peace treaty back in the early 19th century, so it has symbolic relevance for the Czechoslovak government and party. They really want us to sign a peace treaty with the Americans, regardless of the cost to us.' I was rather stunned by how casually Oanh opened up a gap between the Vietnamese view of the war and the official Czechoslovak Communist Party line. (And I later learned that the Napoleonic treaty was signed, not at the town hall, but at Primate's Palace. Oanh's error suggested even more mistrust of the Slovaks and Czechs than I'd thought). The local organisers were upset by the fact that the Vietnamese insisted that they not be present during our conference meetings; they professed to be mystified that the Vietnamese would exclude fellow communists while meeting with the non-communist Americans. But in our conversations with the Czechoslovak officials, I never sensed that they were authentically engaged in the mission of the meeting.

Other encounters with the 'peace bureaucrats', as we came to call them, reinforced our sense of the rottenness of this state. I asked one of our interlocutors his view of Franz Kafka; he replied that Kafka was a fairly well-known Jewish writer. Some of the women in our group reported some unwanted sexual advances; others indicated that some of our hosts were eager to exchange dollars for us (which, we suspected, was motivated by an interest in the very obvious currency black market).

Prague 1968 accordingly seemed to me the logical and necessary outcome of the rot and the ferment we had glimpsed in our brief encounter. That encounter had led me to believe that the youth-led rebellion against authoritarian institutions and culture could be transformative, not only in the US and Western Europe but even in the communist-ruled states.

As one of the early proponents of the vision of 'participatory democracy' articulated by the New Left, I conjectured that the subterranean social and cultural stirrings that burst open in 1968 would usher in a long-term process of collective self-assertion—democratisation from the bottom up. 'Socialism with a human face' seemed one way to define that process in Czechoslovak society. Soviet tanks crushed that hope, but I do think that struggles for institutional democratisation continued and expanded in many ways and in many places. The Velvet Revolution appeared to me to be a dramatic fulfilment of such hopes.

Thirty years later, such hopes are hardly remembered in the former Soviet bloc—and in many other places. Sociologists I hope will be trying not only to diagnose the revivals of the authoritarian movement, but to explore the potential for democratising renewal. Czech and Slovak history over the past half century ought to be a fertile terrain for such a quest.