

**STOP-PRESS**

**A BESIEGED CULTURE  
CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
TEN YEARS AFTER HELSINKI**

*Czechoslovak writers and Charter 77  
address the Budapest Cultural Forum*  
(Charter 77 Document No 24/1985)

Following the 1968 invasion, Czechoslovakia has experienced a long period of destruction of all the outstanding achievements of its national culture, reminiscent in many respects of the dark years of the 1950s, if not worse. This systematic official policy, which is probably without equal in present-day Europe, is the more remarkable in that it is taking place at a time when the Soviet-bloc countries have officially renounced Stalinism, at a time of detente, and of the so-called Helsinki process.

Many Czech and Slovak writers – both those living at home and abroad – as well as many foreign observers continue to draw the world's attention to this phenomenon, which has become a European curiosity; they analyze it, and the Charter 77 human rights movement in Czechoslovakia has on a number of occasions concerned itself with various aspects of it.

The Budapest Cultural Forum – an assembly convened by agreement of the participants of the Helsinki Conference and dealing with cultural matters – now presents us with yet another opportunity to point out what is going on in Czechoslovak art and culture.

The politicians who came to power in Czechoslovakia as a result of the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact states in 1968 turned their attention, shortly after their accession, to the systematic suppression of culture. For reasons which are scarcely explicable, and which cannot even be explained by reference to the wishes of the regime which carried out the intervention, they began mercilessly to suppress any and every form of cultural expression which differed in the slightest from their own ideological demands and which infringed on their highly simplistic, primitive image of the world. The consequences of this policy represent

a frontal attack threatening the very spiritual, cultural, and thus also national identity of the Czechoslovak society.

Many people have already referred to this as "the rule of forgetfulness"; history is falsified, whole areas of history and important past events are made taboo or distorted, the role of countless outstanding personalities refuted, and in many cases these men and women have become non-persons whose names cannot even be mentioned. There are statistics showing how many thousands of scientists, scholars, artists, journalists, and others who, under different circumstances would be playing a creative part in the nation's affairs, have been banned and prevented from working in their respective fields, how many are being persecuted for their earlier work, how many have been persecuted in prison. The authorities have had thousands of books withdrawn from libraries and bookshops, many textbooks and dictionaries have had to be rewritten or in some cases destroyed, dozens of films have ended up on the shelf. And all this as often as not for quite trivial reasons. Everything that can still find public expression is enmeshed in an absurd net of bureaucratic red tape; anything in our culture that is of any worth and has succeeded in obtaining official consent has had to be fought for. Numerous cultural institutions, including scientific institutes and universities as well as artists' associations, have gradually been paralyzed in their activity. However, the creative potential of society and its hunger for authentic cultural values cannot be completely suppressed by administrative means or by police actions. And so, in Czechoslovakia today, important works are still appearing in a variety of fields, and they enjoy great public interest. But they can frequently only be created – and in some genres exclusively so – outside the officially approved sphere, so that they are all but inaccessible to the public at large. Important texts – scientific as well as artistic – are distributed in typescripts, copied over and over again at considerable risk to the typists and distributors, or are published in exile abroad. Many concerts, exhibitions, poetry readings, theatre performances can only take place in private, or at best semi-publicly and are always in danger of police intervention. The majority of the works that do appear officially are the result of many a struggle

with the authorities and usually suffer from censorship and self-censorship. The natural ferment of cultural life as one of the chief means by which a society expresses itself, as well as the natural contact between those who create the culture and the public have thus been seriously disrupted and have to be replaced by various inadequate substitutes. Teaching in schools is completely governed by the official ideology, so that school children and students are given a distorted picture of reality which deforms the cultural awareness of the young.

But it is not only these obvious, generally known and more or less tangible methods by means of which Czechoslovak culture is being hampered and destroyed – there are other more subtle and therefore even more dangerous means to this end. The general bureaucratic bondage of our society, the suppression of natural plurality, and the creation of a kind of state of "non-history" (history replaced by an official plan of events), the growing universal feeling of helplessness, hopelessness, frustration and of the absurdity of any and every creative, social or civic endeavor, as well as the terrible demoralization occasioned by this policy and accompanied by the ever-growing conviction that life is hopelessly grave and empty – all this cannot but have a devastating effect on the nation's culture, which is invariably an expression of the spirit of a given society and a mirror of its time. It will be next to impossible one day to ascertain how many talented men and women were prevented from contributing their share, not because their *œuvre* was banned but because it was never given a chance to be created, this stifling atmosphere in the country nipping the talent in the bud before it ever had an opportunity to mature. Nor will we ever know what even those scientists and artists who *are* allowed to work might have produced if they had had a little more freedom, if this same stifling atmosphere had not undermined *their* creativity.

Not every scholar or artist has a temperament enabling him or her to stand up against this oppressive environment, to risk their careers and livelihood by entering into a permanent, open, urgent confrontation with the state and police apparatus. And why *should* a poet, painter, composer, historian, sociologist, philoso-

pher or novelist have to be a campaigner or a hero? Is there not something monstrous about conditions in a country in which creative freedom, independence, and some sort of contact with their public, however unsatisfactory and meager, can only be enjoyed by those who are prepared to risk imprisonment? Is not such a state of affairs first and foremost an indictment of the conditions that give rise to it.

We trust that the Budapest Cultural Forum has at its disposal, or can obtain, the necessary documentation regarding the conditions which we can only refer to in brief and general terms. This state of affairs simply cannot be excused by any political argument. The authorities in a country in the very heart of Europe are consistently waging war against the spiritual integrity and identity of two nations with a thousand-year-old cultural tradition. And this war is being waged by a government which has put its signature to the Final Act of Helsinki, to the various international conventions on human rights and other such documents. We would like to take the opportunity presented by the holding of the Budapest Cultural Forum to remind the Czechoslovak government of the undertakings it has taken upon itself by signing these agreements. In our view, the world's culture is indivisible and its free development should be of concern to all people of good will.

*Prague, 25 September, 1985*

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Copies: Czechoslovak government, Budapest Cultural Forum