
Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts

Roger Bishop - BookPage

Vaclav Havel is one of the genuine political and moral heroes of the last half of the 20th century. A highly regarded and influential playwright in Czechoslovakia, he became the most prominent dissident leader in his country from the late 1960s until the Velvet Revolution ousted the Communist government in 1989. Since then he has served as the elected president of Czechoslovakia and, later, the Czech Republic. Throughout the years of his struggle of harassment and imprisonment by the Communist regime and also in his later role as a world statesman, Havel has written some of the most eloquent and insightful essays of our time about such subjects as the nature of totalitarianism, the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy, and civil society.

Havel's life and public career appear to represent the triumph of conscience, decency, democratic values, and civility over tyranny and oppression. John Keane, a British political scientist and writer who has known Havel since the early 1980s, has a somewhat different view. He recognizes that "Havel will be judged by posterity as among the most distinguished political figures" of the century. But, as he explains in his compelling new biography, *Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, his subject is a tragic figure whose "misfortune" was to be born in the 20th century and whose "fate" was politics. Keane, best known in the United States for his well-received biography of Tom Paine, sees Havel as "an actor in a prose drama riddled with calamities, injustices, and unhappy endings."

Keane shows how Havel's early life (he was born in 1936) was affected by the ambitions and the military and diplomatic machinations of Hitler and others. Young Vaclav's parents were wealthy by European standards and part of a cultural elite. But under the Nazi rule of the Second World War, their country became a killing field where moral and ethical restrictions were not relevant to the rulers. Havel's family suffered in a variety of ways. The end of war did not bring relief; just before Vaclav's 11th birthday, the Communists assumed the power that they held for over 40 years.

During Havel's youth, his mother took responsibility for her son's education. There were also family friends whose conversations with Vaclav kept him in touch with a wider world. He became particularly attracted to literature and philosophy.

Of special interest is a remarkable circle of literary friends and acquaintances drawn together in 1952 by Havel and his mother. Called the Thirty-Sixers (they were all born in the same year), the group met to discuss a wide range of literary and other subjects.

Keane illuminates the relationship between Havel's art as a playwright and his role as a dissident. His plays often deal with themes of depersonalization and the failure of language.

Two of the most enlightening sections of this biography concern subjects closely identified with Havel. The first is Charter 77, a petition that deals with the importance of civic and human rights. Released in early 1977, it "pointed to the discrepancy between law and reality in socialist Czechoslovakia." Havel wrote the first draft and was deeply involved in the final product.

The second section is a detailed exposition of Havel's famous essay, "The Power of the Powerless." At its heart "it proposes that under any circumstances the downtrodden always contain within themselves the power to remedy their own continuing subordination."

Keane discusses Havel's imprisonment and the letters from prison that he wrote to his first wife Olga, a popular figure. His controversial second marriage, his serious health problems, and his personal flaws and misjudgments, are all covered. The author wisely shows events in context, and we are able to make up our own minds about the life of this often wise and courageous leader.