CHAPTER ONE

Vaclav Havel

A Political Tragedy in Six Acts

By JOHN KEANE

Basic Books

THE YOUNG PRINCE

(1936-1945)

BEGINNINGS

FOLLY

The learned ability of the newborn to flourish in the world's fields of power is always fragile and risky. There are times when the cries of innocents are extinguished by stupidity, squalor, hunger, violence. Even when they survive the perils of birth, the newborn find their lives complicated by the power dynamics of families, communities, business firms, whole economies, parties, governments, and states. Such organizations are menacing. They tower over them like colossi. Organizations make the innocent look and feel small. The newborn are turned into the playthings of power relations — of which they know little, let alone can understand, or tame or control.

Young Venoušek's early years were exactly like this. It has often been said — by card-carrying Communists, sceptical conservatives, guilted liberals — that he enjoyed a comfortable `bourgeois' upbringing. The sad truth is that his life as `a well-fed piglet' began badly within a family whose ideals were smashed up by folly, military occupation, surveillance, air raids, war, and totalitarianism. Venoušek took his first steps in the early autumn of 1937 — at precisely the moment that Czechoslovakia was pushed to its knees by the power-posturing of neighbouring states and alliances. Not everybody saw what was happening. Or they foolishly turned a blind eye, as did the most popular contemporary guide for foreign travellers to Prague. First published in the month of Venoušek's birth, the guide conjured his home town into an exotic haven. The guide marvelled over Prague's green spaces and wooded surroundings; the breathtaking views of the city from the heights of Petrín, Hradcany, and Letná; and the wealth of architectural beauty — Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, rococo, and especially baroque buildings resonating its varied history from the time of the seventh century. Praise was heaped upon the Prague diet of freshwater trout and carp;

goose, duck and venison; pilsner, dark beer from Smíchov, fiery plum brandy and agreeable Moravian wine; only a small frown was reserved for the `unexpected' local sandwiches, consisting of *topless* slices of buttered bread covered in salami, egg, pickled cucumber, fish or ham. The guide noted that central heating of residences was common; that road traffic moved on the left; and that a system of red letter-boxes for the quick delivery of letters franked with 90-heller stamps functioned well. Although sugar was rationed, commodities like soap and matches were plentiful, while the commercial hub in St Wenceslas Square was often thronged with shoppers, said the guide.

The guide admired Prague's modernist feel. It pointed to the example of `a new suburb' called Barrandov, built on a rock cliff overlooking the River Vltava and offering magnificent views of the city. The text left unmentioned that it was owned by the Havel family; it simply noted that Barrandov had `a magnificent restaurant which has become a popular afternoon and evening rendezvous for those wishing to escape from the city for an hour or two. It has a well-equipped bathing pool and numerous tennis courts.' The guide went on to report the popularity of bookable cinema performances, theatres, music halls, cabarets, low-price symphonies, the opera performances of Smetana's *Libuše*, Dvorák's *Rusalka* and Janácek's *Jenufa*, and the amusing comedies of Voskovec and Werich. The guide noted the enthusiasm in Prague for public performances by Sokol gymnasts, at which thousands of young women in loose Romanesque dresses and young men dressed in red shirts and feathered caps together performed exercises in lines and patterns designed to highlight the values of self-control, cool courage, and the synchronism of body and mind. The guide reported that in matters of recreation young people were keen on tennis, volleyball, *házená* (a handball game played by women), football, ice-hockey, skating, skiing, athletics, and (thanks to the local Barrandov studios) the new medium of cinema. The professional classes, the guide reported, seemed unusually knowledgeable about world and current affairs, no doubt because for two or three hours per week on average they frequented cafés well stocked with a wide range of domestic and foreign newspapers and periodicals, both illustrated and literary. The guide reserved a short epilogue for politics and international affairs. It noted that the citizens of Prague had every right to be proud of their country's achievements. There had been a steady consolidation of its various territorial units. The Czechs and Slovaks were setting an example to other nations by practising tolerance and respect towards the claims of the minority populations of Germans, Hungarians, Poles and others. Czechoslovakia enjoyed warm relations with its neighbours. The country was an ardent supporter of the League of Nations. The recent resignation (on 14 December 1935) for health reasons of the great statesman, eighty-five-year-old President T. G. Masaryk, had changed nothing. `At the election held in the Vladislav Hall of the Prague Castle,' the guide concluded, `Dr Edward Beneš was elected to succeed him. Thus, after having been its

Foreign Secretary ever since the republic was founded, Dr Beneš became Czechoslovakia's second President and a continuity of the country's internal and external policies, with Dr Milan Hodza as Prime Minister, was assured.'

The words harboured foolish thinking, proving yet again that fools enjoy serenity in the company of knaves. The unpleasant fact was that Havel's country of birth was about to be strangled alive by a Nazi Germany on the loose in central Europe. Ever since late 1933, when Hitler had pulled Germany out of the League of Nations, the tiny middle-European state of Czechoslovakia had begun to look and feel ever smaller. During the summer of 1934, in clear defiance of the Versailles settlement, the Nazis had managed a coup in Austria by murdering its Chancellor, Dr Engelbert Dolfuss, who favoured a one-party dictatorship but anti-Nazi state. In 1935, by means of a plebiscite envisaged in the Versailles Treaty, the Saarland had been incorporated within the Reich. Hitler promptly compounded the victory by reconstituting the Luftwaffe, reintroducing conscription, and renouncing any commitment to disarmament. In the spring of 1936, in open defiance of the Treaty, the Nazis marched into the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland, and during the course of the next year they signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Mussolini's Italy and withdrew from the British-backed Non-Intervention Committee that was aiming to shield Spain from foreign armies. Then in March 1938 — Havel was eighteen months old, still in nappies but mincing his first words — the Nazis tasted their greatest triumph yet: the engineered *Anschluss* or `annexation' of Austria, the proclamation of a Greater German Reich, and the welcoming of Hitler's splendid cavalcade in Vienna by flag-waving, cheering crowds kept orderly by Austrian police proudly wearing Nazi insignia.

The Western powers reacted to expansionism with foolish fumblings. Especially given that Hitler had no prepared timetable for his forays, and that his so-called policy of `peaceful aggression' relied at this stage mainly on huffing and puffing, big-mouthed bluffing and local cuffing — he judged that he could get his way mainly by localized conflict that fell short of war — the reactions of states like Britain appear in retrospect to be nothing short of political lunacy. It seemed obvious to the British in particular that the best antidote to Hitler was on the one hand to recruit France and the Soviet Union as counterweights to Nazism, thereby re-creating the security triangle of the Great War, meanwhile hoping that Germany could be lured into playing the role of anchor state in a new European security zone. This episode of balance-of-power politics produced perverse results.

For many contemporary observers, the specifically modern principle of the balance of power among territorial states — a power-sharing arrangement that ensures that `a tiny republic is no less a

sovereign state than the most powerful kingdom' — was the dominant principle, the fundamental law of interstate relations in the European region. It had indeed been so since the emergence, during the Renaissance, of a system of armed territorial states. British foreign policy supposed that the principle was still operative, but the commitment produced evil contradictions. Quite apart from the problem of complicity with the most horrendous programme of organized murder that Europe had ever seen — Stalin was in the middle of liquidating more Communists than any despot of the twentieth century — the British vision required giving the Nazis precisely what they wanted: more room in middle Europe to secure and expand the *Volksmasse*, the racial community of Germans not yet united under one state. For various reasons, the requirement came easily to the British. Influential conservatives in that country considered that Germany had suffered unjustly at the hands of the victors at Versailles while British policy-makers, too ignorant about German politics to grasp the novelty of totalitarianism, took Hitler at his word in presuming that Nazi ambitions were strictly limited to areas inhabited by Germans. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain even hoped that Hitler would turn out to be another Bismarck. If Germany were satisfied by concessions, he supposed, it would prove to be a safeguard of European security — thereby overcoming the instability caused by France's little ally Czechoslovakia, and all the other weakling states of central-eastern Europe created by the controversial Versailles settlement.

It followed from this view of Germany as a steadying force that Prague would need to be pressed into concessions to Berlin. Czechoslovakia, the most resilient parliamentary republic of central Europe, was to be turned into a devil's playground. It did not follow automatically that Czechoslovakia had to be sacrificed without any tangible security guarantees from the Nazis, but that was to be the tragic outcome. During the second half of September 1938, Chamberlain met thrice with Hitler. `In spite of the hardness and ruthlessness of his face,' the Prime Minister mused of the ex-Austrian ex-corporal, `I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon.' At their meeting at Berchtesgaden on 15 September, Hitler insisted on the right of `Sudetenland' to secede from Czechoslovakia. He added positively that this was `the Führer's last demand'.

Like a dog returning to its vomit, the fool Chamberlain returned to his folly. The fools listened. Chamberlain agreed to give Hitler's demand careful consideration, but he did not expect Hitler to move so swiftly, as he did on 23 September at Godesberg by demanding the evacuation and annexation of the Sudetenland within five days. While the British cabinet initially rejected the ultimatum, France and Germany began to mobilize their armies, and at Munich on 29-30 September, in the presence of the Führer, Mussolini and the socialist Edouard Daladier, the spineless and clueless Chamberlain willingly caved in. The British in effect did the work of the

Nazis. Chamberlain, who said he was *pleasantly* tired after nine long hours with Hitler, was certain that there would now be no war. He immediately issued an ultimatum to the Czechoslovak delegation, huddled in an adjoining room, that they should accept the amputation of their state or else suffer more dramatic consequences, like the death of their body politic. Between yawns, Chamberlain spoke fine words about how the big powers would protect the rump Czechoslovak state. The Czechoslovak delegates were told that their response was not required, and that they should leave. In the same spirit as the Nazi-saluting English football team playing against Germany earlier that year in Berlin, Chamberlain then proceeded to put his hopes in a draft declaration on Anglo-German friendship, some version of which was waved in the air as he stepped from his plane in London, announcing with a triumphant smile the outbreak of `Peace in our time'.

These foolish words of a man who thought himself wise but made his folly sovereign turned out to be the elixir of Hitlerite power. In this fools' paradise called Europe, foul-tempered Hitler — nicknamed the *Teppichfresser* (carpet-eater) by some diplomats — drank delight. Folly nourished his worst qualities. He shouted, threatened violence, grudgingly promised to keep the dogs of war leashed for a while, then shouted and threatened violence again. `*Es hat keinen Sinn weiter zu verhandeln* [There's no sense at all in negotiating further],' he bellowed to Chamberlain's emissary. `Germans are being treated like niggers,' he screamed. `No one would dare to treat even the Turks like that.' Like a rapist, he then lowered his voice, and growled, `On 1 October [1938] I shall have Czechoslovakia where I want her. If France and England decide to strike, let them strike.'

This kind of behaviour, succoured by Chamberlain's foolishness, disgraced the art of negotiation, undermined Western support for further talks with Hitler, and convinced him, and probably Stalin and Mussolini as well, that further `peaceful aggression' elsewhere in Europe would reap easy dividends. The policy of appeasement spelled immediate disaster for the rump Czechoslovak polity, which under the initial leadership of President Beneš was forced to suffer textbook lessons in the art of destroying a state by stages. Verbal threats followed by confusion; the confiscation of land; the spreading fever of fear; growing military pressures from without: all this served within the republic to create power vacuums within which politicians and other actors seemed to float helplessly.

The immediate effect of the Munich appeasement was to intensify the powerlessness of the state authorities. In matters of foreign policy, Czechoslovakia slipped to the status of a mere satellite state. At home, its parliamentary republican institutions suffered paralysis. Indistinct leadership, directionless policy-making, the open flouting of laws began to pave the way for a peaceful transition from democracy to dictatorship. As if hypnotized by their Nazi neighbours, the

Czechoslovak political class tried desperately to forestall German interference in their affairs and to promote political recovery by emulating certain key features, but not the excesses, of Nazi rule. Within a few months of the Munich fiasco — young Venoušek was now just over two years old — pre-publication press censorship was introduced. Political exiles from Germany were extradited into the hands of the Gestapo without any vocal opposition. The National Assembly authorized the executive to legislate by decree in cases of emergency. The Communist Party was abolished and trade unions were merged into a single organization dominated by the right-wing social-democratic National Labour Party. Jews were encouraged to emigrate and many of them encountered growing discrimination by the authorities in both the private professions and state-sector employment. The election, on 30 November 1938 by the National Assembly, of Emil Hácha as third President of the country (which was soon to be renamed 'The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia') symbolized all these developments. So did his foolish cabinet address shortly after his election. Formulated in the rear-view mirror of time, it perfectly reflected the new-fangled policy of appeasement. `Czechoslovak statesmen should take the national saint, Prince Wenceslas, as their model,' he told his ministers. `Prince Wenceslas fought for German-Czech understanding, although initially he did not find understanding with his own people.'

REPUBLICANS

Hácha's advice was insulting to young Venoušek's family. The historical analogy he drew was not merely unfortunate — Prince Wenceslas was murdered in A.D. 935 by his younger brother Boleslav, whose sibling jealousy was combined with strong disapproval of Wenceslas's political concessions to the German Empire. Pressured by Great Britain, abandoned by France and the Soviet Union, the Czechoslovak government's capitulation to the Munich agreement and to the growing military power of Nazism was understandable. But it flung the whole Havel family into turmoil. Václav M. Havel, Venoušek's father, was a strong-minded entrepreneur-citizen with definite anti-fascist views. `We reject the prophets who want to solve the Depression by a return to lower levels of culture and economy,' he wrote shortly after Hitler had come to power. Wavy-haired, grey-blue-eyed, tiny Mr Havel was known to be a kind and generous man of calm moderation. He held firm political views. `We do not want to go backwards in civilization', he wrote. He found repugnant `nationalism', `irredentism' and `racialist messianism'. These evils needed to be wiped out —

principally by embracing the power-sharing, social-liberal principles of `openness and truthfulness, purity of political ends and political means, intelligent and honest politics'.

Venoušek's father thought that these high principles required a new system of welfare-state-regulated capitalism and parliamentary democracy guided by a `cultural elite'. A modern-mannered republic was his ideal. `To avoid any misunderstanding,' he once said in a speech, `by "elite" we do not mean a closed caste, but rather an unorganized, unorganizable partnership of creative spirits, who thanks to their strong cultural values form a cultural authority in society, a spiritual government which — free of all means of power — is a durable and continuous guardian of successful social improvement.' The task of the cultural elite, of which he clearly considered himself a member, was to work for a polity defined by the non-violent sharing of power. Mr Havel was not a man of the Left. He usually voted for the National Democrats — a party founded by Karel Kramár, who in 1919 became Prime Minister of the new Czechoslovak state. Mr Havel stood for open government, full employment, socially responsible investment, the cultivation of individual conscience and creative responsibility through education, and nurturing `mutual assistance and co-operation' through civilized corporatist bargaining among unions, businesses and professions. `Democratically onwards!' he liked to say to his friends. He usually added, in the next breath, that the world of international politics now needed to cultivate genuine patriotism among citizens, support for peace through the League of Nations, and the protection of sovereign autonomy of nation states. His conclusion was utterly old-fashioned. `The unity and independence of the Czechoslovak state,' he said, `are not subjects open for discussion.'

These patriotic social-liberal views were redolent of an old and respectable family whose known roots stretched back into the late eighteenth century. Young Venoušek was soon to hear tales, told by his father and mother, of the family's fair share of misfits and tragic figures: a great-great-grandmother who died in childbirth; a distant cousin who was taken by tuberculosis; a great uncle Rajmund who probably drank himself to death; another uncle, a butcher by trade, who died young of blood-poisoning. The family otherwise consisted of stolidly bourgeois stock. A rare photograph of Venoušek, a smiling four year old, dressed in a heavy coat and beret and clutching an umbrella, shows him standing in Prague's Košíre cemetery, beside the soon-to-be-destroyed family tomb that contained family members dating back 200 years. His great-great-grandfather, Vácslav Julius Havel was the first-born son of a well-known Prague miller and citizen; his wife, Terezie (1816-1882), who died suddenly from an attack of pneumonia, came from a family of moderately prosperous farmers. Venoušek's great-grandparents were prominent merchants and restaurateurs, while his

grandfather, a successful Prague building contractor who married a much sought-after wealthy beauty, lived and worked, surrounded by servants, within a `bourgeois milieu'.

Venoušek's grandparents were also members of the `cultural elite' that favoured independence from the Austro-Hungarian empire. They grew up as Czech patriots within a territory whose ruling group remained instinctively `Austrian'. Unlike Lieutenant Lukáš — a character in Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* — the Havels were not Czechs who equated being a Czech with membership of some kind of secret organization, who spoke German in society, wrote German, and who read Czech books and said to others in confidence: `Let's be Czechs, but no one need know about it.' The Havels refused to educate their children in German-speaking schools. Young Venoušek's industrious grandfather, Vácslav Havel, `employed only Czechs wherever he could'. He built the first indoor ice rink in Prague; sited on Primátorský Island, it was called Harmonia, and quickly proved to be a popular meeting point for Prague's cultural elite. His greatest project was the design and construction, from 1905 onwards, of Lucerna, the first and largest modern entertainment complex in Prague. It was inspired by his travels to such cities as Paris, Copenhagen, Milan and Berlin and by his patriotic faith that one day Prague would become a European metropolis.

In political terms, Venoušek's grandfather openly described himself as a `Young Czech'. That meant that he had a poor opinion of the Habsburg dynasty that ruled over the Bohemian lands for 300 years. It was bad rule, he thought. The dynasty had destroyed religious freedom and suppressed the Czech language. It had driven the elite of the nation's nobility and church into exile, distributed estates and offices to alien caretakers, and turned the Czechs into an impotent minority within an ill-administered province. Venoušek's grandfather was proud of the 1918 declaration of Czechoslovak independence. He considered it a brave revolution, in which not a drop of blood was spilled, no windows were broken, and in which the first law passed by the revolutionary committee declared: `All existing laws remain in force.'

These opinions counted. Venoušek's grandfather was well connected within the worlds of Prague business, medicine, arts, education, and politics. He was good friends, for example, with Karel Kramár, a well-known founder of the Czechoslovak state and political rival of Tomáš G. Masaryk. He kept company with the Deputy Mayor of Prague, Dr Štech, and was well acquainted with Professor Jan Jesenský, the father of Milena Jesenská, and Alois Rašín, who later became Minister of Finance in the First Republic of Czechoslovakia. Venoušek's grandfather was also active in theatre circles. He was treasurer of the National Theatre Association (among whose members his nickname was `The Finance Minister'). He and his wife, who was a renowned cook, were regular

hosts of lavish dinner parties, whose invited guests included many well-known artistic personalities, among them the lyric poet and dramatist Jaroslav Kvapil, and the most famous Prague poet of the day, Jaroslav Vrchlický, revered for his weaning of Czech literature away from German domination and (as his blurred images in the Havel family archives reveal) notorious for refusing to sit or stand still before the magnesium lamp camera, to which he had a principled aversion.

Venoušek's father — according to the rather dry account he gave of his own early years — thought of himself as a faithful carrier of this family tradition of republican Czech bourgeois respectability. By European standards, the family was `apparently wealthy'. Although considerable debts were incurred from building the Lucerna complex, its assets enabled the family to lead a life of cosmopolitan luxury. As a young boy, before the First World War, Venoušek's father was taken on family trips to Italy, France, Belgium, and to Holland, where in Oostende (according to family folklore) he heard a performance of the great Italian opera singer, Caruso. The family often took holidays abroad. During the First Republic, they travelled on summer holidays to seaside resorts in Germany and Italy, and to the breathtaking lakeside setting at Bled, located in today's Slovenia; in wintertime, they liked to stay closer to home, at favourite ski slopes in Mnichovice and in the Giant Mountains (Krkonoše). After Venoušek was born, the Havel family liked to stay in their spacious summer residence at Havlov, a few hours by car from Prague. Accompanied by servants, the family also loved to venture out of Prague on fine-weather Sunday outings, especially by car, and then steamboat down the Vltava River to Braník, where they were ferried across the river to picnic and climb the cliffs of Barrandov in search of trilobites. Venoušek's father and mother also hosted visits to Havlov from Prague notables. Painters, lawyers, politicians, writers — what they called `educated Prague society' — were regular guests at the family table. Among them was the most influential Czech writer of the First Republic, the witty and wise Karel Capek, whose novel *War with the Newts* (published in the year of Venoušek's birth) satirized fascism, colonialism and greedy capitalism, all in the spirit of what Czechs like to call *lidskost*: down-to-earth sympathy and kindness for others.

True to the family's Young Czech instincts, Venoušek's father was sent to his father's old school, the Czech reálke, located in Jecná Street, near Charles Square, in central Prague. He later went on to study construction engineering at the Czech Polytechnic in Prague, where amidst the fears and hopes, disruption and destruction generated by the Great War, he became active in student politics. Shortly after the end of hostilities, at the moment of the birth of Czechoslovakia in 1918, he was elected as the first Chairman of the Union of Czechoslovak Students. The political experience made him `a life-long democrat, an admirer of Masaryk'. He was attracted to Masaryk's ideal of a

`perpetually self-reforming democracy' and he became convinced, for the rest of his life, that politics was important and that thinking and acting as an informed citizen was a duty, not a luxury. `Political activity or inactivity is a question of conscience,' he later wrote. `We are the state — and each of us is therefore responsible for its condition and future. If we tolerate a defective system, it is because we have not yet created anything better; bad people will make decisions only until such time as better people have acquired the courage, strength and ability to replace them. A new political programme requires creativity, activity and radicalism, both intellectual and moral.'

The spirit of republicanism pervaded his visionary advice to an audience of young people, given in the month of Hitler's accession to power, to work for a `quality democracy' in the new Czechoslovakia. Contemporary democracies like Czechoslovakia, he argued, suffered from a variety of ailments, most of them traceable to the tyranny of `the mechanical spirit'. Venoušek's father here drew upon the authority of a family friend, the Brno philosopher J. L. Fischer, to condemn the hegemony of mechanical reason. Mr Havel disliked the bad habit of supposing that both nature and society can and should be observed, numbered, recorded, planned, and ordered about at will. The mechanical spirit, he told his young audience, had colonized the dominant ideologies of the times. Liberal individualism, which presumes like an accountant that each and every individual is `an absolutely free unit' guided by the criteria of `size and number, minimum expense and maximum benefit', was a case in point. Bossy forms of collectivism pushed in the same direction. Fascism perversely worships the Nation and state-building, while Communism, guided by the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat, ends up doing the same by greedily monopolizing power over its subjects in the name of class struggle.

Despite the rise of German fascism, Mr Havel predicted that these ideologies of impersonal mechanization would eventually lose their grip upon the world. His stated belief in human progress was often put so fulsomely that the faces of its nineteenth-century exponents would have flushed. `Every thought and every organism goes through a certain development,' he wrote. `The times call for new relations and contexts. Progress then assumes that the positive values and achievements bequeathed to us by the past and still unsurpassed will be preserved. Those, however, which have lost their significance cannot be permitted to be an obstacle to new development. That is the principle of evolution.' Venoušek's father used this principle to predict the end of liberal democracy. `The idea of the responsibility of the individual for the whole, and of the whole for each individual' was gaining ground. So too was the related insight that the individual, far from being an atom whose motion is calculable, is rather `a person and personality variously capable of various tasks and continually changing'. All this was plainly evident in contemporary architectural designs that

favoured simplicity, horizontality and function, rather than mere form. The trend was evident as well in industrial experiments, like the Bat'a employee autonomy-and-performance schemes in the field of shoe-manufacturing. And it could be seen in the magnificent Sokol rallies, held to the sound of loudspeaker music. `Everyone who has watched the undulating masses during physical training notes with interest the individuals, the beauty of the function of man in relation to the tremendous whole. More striking, however, is the way that every individual is trained in his unit to develop his own unique characteristics and attitude, despite the tremendous and uniform appearance of the whole.' Such experiments, observed Mr Havel, signalled the demechanization of life and the birth of a *quality* democracy that values power-sharing, choice, personal responsibility, equality of opportunity, patriotism, functionalism [*ùcelnost*], voluntary discipline, beauty, openness, public accountability, and personal belief in a God. `I am convinced that there is a more effective form of democratic government than today's,' he concluded. `It is the task of all who acknowledge the high moral value of democratic ideals to strive, without delay and with every ounce of energy, for the reconstruction of our democracy in the spirit of the times.'

DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND

The times were unripe for such dreaming. The fledgling parliamentary republic of Czechoslovakia was on the verge of becoming the unlucky testing ground for something new in the ways and means of power. A bizarre symbol of things to come was the kowtowing of one head of state to another. The old Chinese custom of touching the ground with one's forehead as a sign of worship or absolute submission to power (*k'o-t'ou*, from *k'o*, knock, *t'ou*, head) — the Czechs call it crawling up someone's arse — was repeated on the evening of 14 March 1939, when the top-hatted, stooping President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Emil Hácha, hurried by train from Prague to Berlin to keep an appointment with Hitler. It is unclear just how well Hácha along the way had digested the ominous news that that same evening, at 17.30 hours, the crack SS Bodyguard `Adolf Hitler' had begun to occupy the Ostrava region, in the north of the country. It is known that Hácha's appointment began badly. The moody film buff Führer — the man who seemed to regard total war as a big-budget film — made his counterpart wait two hours so that he could finish watching a movie. It was an escapist romance, recommended to him as usual by Goebbels, appropriately enough entitled *A Hopeless Case (Ein Hoffnungsloser Fall).*

Business got under way at a quarter-past one in the morning, by which time the old and frail Hácha had been mesmerized into playing the role of the mouse before the lion. Hácha was the first to open his mouth. He repeated what he had said publicly before leaving Prague: that the Czechoslovak state indeed belonged both geographically and historically to the sphere of German power. Apparently so surprised by Hácha's submissiveness, Hitler, sipping his favourite mineral water, quickly roared that within six hours the German armed forces would invade Czechoslovakia from three sides, crushing ruthlessly any resistance along the way. It was a lie. German airfields were at that moment enshrouded in fog. But the lie had instant effect. The faint-headed Hácha collapsed into the arms of the Führer's personal physician, Dr Morell, who injected him at once with dextrose and vitamins. The kowtowed Hácha with eyes barely open was then told by Göring that the Luftwaffe would smash any Czech resistance by reducing Prague to a pile of rubble. The bluffing worked. Hácha telephoned Prague to order that there be no resistance to the invading troops. He then reassured Hitler and his entourage of clever thugs that Czechoslovakia would do anything to avoid bloodshed. Sitting beside Hitler just before dawn, Hácha concluded the meeting by signing a statement prepared by the Nazis. `The Czechoslovak President declared that ... he confidently placed the fate of the Czech people and country in the hands of the Führer of the German Reich,' the statement ran. It was a masterpiece of political deception. `The Führer accepted this declaration and expressed his intention of taking the Czech people under the protection of the German Reich and of guaranteeing them an autonomous development of their ethnic life as suited their character.'

The words were to be written like foul-mouthed graffiti over the young Václav Havel's life during the next six years. Hácha's faint-headed behaviour before Hitler fitted perfectly the stereotype of Czechs as self-pitying, childlike subjects skilled at stepping away from responsibility — subjects who are then forced by others to pay heavily for their cowardice and to wallow in a `martyr complex'. It was later said in Hácha's defence that he tried his best under difficult circumstances to protect his fellow citizens. And Hácha himself claimed that he had sacrificed the state to save the nation. But the bitter truth was that the Czechs were forced to pay heavily for their leader's kowtowing. The Czechoslovak state was rapidly dismembered. Ruthenia was forcibly annexed by Hungary. Slovakia was reorganized into an independent state with limited sovereign powers. And Bohemia and Moravia, once the heartlands of the republic, were pushed and shoved through several stages of Nazification.

`*Es kommt der Tag* [The day will come],' Czech friends of the Nazis used to whisper, and here it was. Hours after Hácha's fateful meeting with Hitler, in blizzard conditions, German troops poured

into Prague, red-faced by sleet and frost, and perhaps even a touch of shame. Hitler followed, checking in to Prague Castle at Hradcany on the evening of 15 March. Initially, the Nazis treated their prey with caution. Militant pragmatism dictated that the Czechs were to be exploited for the Nazi war effort with a minimum outlay of German resources. Talk of Czech-German co-operation abounded. The important independent powers of the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia — customs and monetary affairs, military authority and defence, foreign affairs, and postal and telecommunications facilities — were all wiped out by decree. All governmental institutions were placed under the immediate authority of the `Reichsprotektor', an office filled by the former German foreign minister, Baron von Neurath, who from here on countermanded `in the interest of the Reich' any measures of the government of the Protectorate. The Czechoslovak army was disbanded. Parliament was dissolved. All political parties were suspended. Privileges were extended to the ethnic German-speaking minority, such as the right of Reich citizenship, immunity from Czech courts of justice, and promotion within the administration of such cities as Prague, Brno, Olomouc, and Ceské Budejovice. Meanwhile, `sensible' measures against Jews were taken, which meant that a climate of fear and suspicion was nurtured, for instance by sacking Jewish civil servants and banning the Jewish population from purchasing or disposing of their property.

Following the declaration of war on Germany by Britain and France on 3 September 1939, but especially after the posting to Prague two years later of Reinhard Heydrich, former boss of the Reich Security Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), the Nazis toughened their methods of governing. Stimulated by military victories against the Soviet Union, and confident in their own ability to deal with reported Czech resistance, and keen to win what Goebbels liked to call the `chess match for power,' the Heydrich administration swiftly moved in for the kill. Martial law was declared. The Gestapo undertook large-scale arrests, turning first mainly to German political *émigrés*. Rounds of summary court judgements and executions followed. Material concessions to peasants and workers were combined with policies aimed at terrorizing and weeding out intellectuals. The Czechs were entitled to live a private existence so long as they didn't think or act publicly. Colleges and universities were closed and their buildings assigned either to the German University in Prague or used for different functions, as happened to the building of Prague's college of law, which was turned into a *Schutzstaffel* (SS) barracks. Student dormitories were ransacked. Thousands of students and staff were arrested. The `ring-leaders' among them were summarily shot. Many others were carted off as hostages to the Oranienburg concentration camp, from which they were set free by handfuls and permitted to return home, frightened by their brush with death.

Nazi government in this form bore the stamp of Heydrich, under whose leadership the Protectorate was changed by fits and starts into a well-functioning system of total power, the likes of which Czechs had never before experienced. This was no dictatorship or despotism. It was an entirely new configuration of power, whose contours defied all traditional categories of political thought. It was soon to be called `totalitarian'. The word has subsequently lost much of its sting through familiarity and misuse, but for descriptive purposes it remains chillingly apt. Under conditions of totalitarianism nobody — not even its commanders — was safe from persecution, or death. Totalitarian rule was specifically geared to organizing, breaking up and destroying everything that was living, dead, inert. Land, shared historical memories, men, women, and children: these were the objects of totalitarian rule, which more savagely rampaged through the world only *after* its adversaries were defeated and destroyed.

The totalitarian power that the Nazis brought to Prague was unhinged power. Balzac (in *Cousine Bette*) noted that `arbitrary rule is power gone mad', but the madness of totalitarian power was beyond the bounds of his wildest imaginings. Transforming the world into a hell-hole, totalitarianism was uninhibited power enjoying a monopoly of the means of available violence. Totalitarian power was the unrestricted capacity to organize and push people and things down the path of complete annihilation. Totalitarian power produced total powerlessness. It even regarded suicide as an insult, and it did all it could to prevent it by emaciating and grinding down the bodies of its victims — in the last instance by means of torture, or by a bullet through the head of the one trying to reach the electrified fence. Totalitarian power naturally created an inferno of fear and uncertainty for everybody and everything. Nobody was safe from annihilation. Totalitarian power certainly relied upon formal organizations: specialized administrative staff; hierarchies of command; the scheduling of services; codes of conduct and discipline for personnel; systematic record-keeping. In this way, totalitarian power could function well by ensuring smooth administration, even if its staff were second-rate, or prone to rivalry, protection and corruption. Totalitarian rule also certainly put to good use individuals who were careerists, or who had a strong sense of duty and a knack for organizing things and getting jobs done. Yet totalitarian power was most definitely not a species of bureaucratic rule. For one thing, it cultivated and required its victims' willingness to take the initiative in performing the dirty business — for instance by informing on others, or supervising prison work-squads. For another thing, totalitarianism recognized no hindering rules or restrictions; it was self-propelling power that thrived on crashing through the world, demolishing all barriers along the way. Totalitarian power tended to undermine bureaucratic rule. It ignored considerations of economic utility or *Realpolitik*. And it did away with talk of moral or ethical restrictions. It treated such talk as rubbish left over from a corrupted past.

The totalitarianism of the Reichsprotektorat dispensed with ideological convictions. Although it operated under the canopy of a totalizing ideology — the ideology stressed the animal-like struggle of the new Reich against its enemies, and the imperative of building a new Europe modelled on the emerging *Volksgemeinschaft* of the Third Reich — totalitarian power effectively broke free from all such ideological self-justifications. The old maxim that power is only effective when it is legitimate in the eyes of the ruled was disproven by totalitarian power, which was not at all a type of rule guided by principled aims and calculations of how to achieve certain ends. Or, rather, totalitarian power was guided by only one end: the annihilation of its designated enemies. Totalitarian power was impulsive, arbitrary, terroristic, murderous. Not even its unlimited power of culling and sewing a label on whole categories of the population — Jews, homosexuals, Romanies, Poles, Jehovah's Witnesses, the unfit — was free of arbitrariness, uncertainty and disorder. Everything became provisional. The essence of totalitarian power was terror — soul- and body-destroying fear driven by the expectation that death and destruction at the hands of the secret police, army or `unidentified thugs' were just around the corner.

Thanks to the Reichsprotektorat, everybody, including the administrators and accomplices of the regime, was potentially superfluous. `Force should be right,' said the totalitarian voice, `or rather, right and wrong should lose their names, and so should justice.' The living were flung into a merciless struggle of each against all. The boundaries between life and death dissolved. Past and present and future collapsed into each other. Each minute was potentially the last minute. A second could feel like a lifetime. Or like nothing at all. Everyone was `raw material'. Each individual was on terror's hit list. Anyone — in the Auschwitz jargon — could be turned into a walking dead *Muselmann* (`Muslim') whose body and soul disintegrate before the eyes of others. Anyone could be disposed of without trace. Murder naturally succoured this form of power. It demonstrated its omnipotence. Cruel excess was constantly required. Talented and ingenious barbarism functioned as a form of self-assertion — as sadistic proof that there were no external barriers to power, that those who were acting on the world were capable of anything, that the unthinkable was real. It was therefore not surprising that bizarre forms of dastardly evil resulted. Totalitarianism was a killing field, which is why the mass grave and the concentration camp, in which subjects were stripped of the right to have rights and then exterminated, were its perfect manifestations — and not somehow embarrassing exceptions. Extermination of individuals and whole groups — one might even say all of humanity — was the logical and practical end point of totalitarian power.

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