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Michael Kraus

Did the Charter 77 Movement Bring An End to Communism?

Thirty years after Charter 77—the opposition group that figured centrally in developments that led to the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia—the precise historical significance of this dissident movement has come to seem ambiguous. Indeed, on the occasion of this anniversary, instead of celebrating—as they should—the end of the repressive communist regime, Czechs are inclined to disagree significantly on the implications of their recent past.

The main contours of the story of Charter 77 will be known to many readers. Issued in January 1977, the declaration of Charter 77, initially signed by 242 signatories, appealed to the Prague government to respect the international and domestic commitments it undertook when it ratified the 1975 Helsinki Accords. In Helsinki, representatives of thirty-five countries, including Czechoslovakia, had gathered to sign the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and in doing so committed their governments to respect, “promote and encourage the effective exercise of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and other rights and freedoms all of which derive from the inherent dignity of the human person and are essential for his free and full development.” Charter 77 defined itself as “a free, informal, open community of people of different convictions, different faiths, and different professions united by the will to strive, individually and collectively, for the respect of civic and human rights in our own country and throughout the world.” The declaration stated that international commitments signed by the government of Czechoslovakia “serve as an urgent reminder of the extent to which basic human rights in [Czechoslovakia] exist, regrettably, only on paper . . . The right to freedom of expression is in our case purely illusory . . .”

As the document went on to point out:

Tens of thousands of our citizens are prevented from working in their own fields for the sole reason that they hold views differing from official ones, and are discriminated against and harassed in all kinds of ways by the authorities and public organizations. Deprived as they are of any means to defend themselves, they become victims of a

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virtual apartheid . . . Hundreds of thousands of other citizens are . . . condemned to live in constant danger of unemployment or other penalties if they voice their own opinions.

Over the course of its thirteen-year history, Charter 77 went on to issue nearly six hundred “documents,” reports chronicling not only the violations of human rights but also the government’s sorry record in such areas as education, environment, health, and the prison system. Thus, one of Charter’s major contributions was to break the government monopoly on information. In addition to producing statements concerning the regime’s human rights record and providing expert analyses on a whole host of social issues, Charter activists also challenged the government to address numerous neglected problems, such as the plight of the Romani population or the destruction of Jewish monuments; they raised contentious questions, including that of “The Right to History,” which referred to the devastation of the historical profession. In this way, Charter 77 sought to engender public debate and thereby contribute to the emergence of authentic public opinion. Both collectively as a human rights movement and in their individual capacities, the Chartists were also instrumental in sponsoring underground seminars, circulating *samizdat* publications by banned authors, and launching unofficial journals or staging illicit theater productions.

Taken overall, this was a major undertaking whose aim was to create a parallel culture, uncensored by the state. Charter 77 also annually registered its protest against the continuing Soviet occupation, sponsored the commemoration of events, like the 1918 founding of the Czechoslovak state, which the regime deliberately chose to ignore, and engaged Western peace activists in a dialogue about the relationship between peace and human rights.

Along with its offspring, a human rights monitoring group that called itself the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS), the Charter 77 movement served Czechoslovakia’s (as well as other) human rights activists as a source of inspiration for thirteen years until the collapse of communist power. Particularly after 1987, when other independent groups—including an environmental movement and various student-led initiatives—began to emerge, concerted efforts in these areas were no longer the exclusive domain of the Chartists, but in most instances the new groups had been inspired by Charter 77 or organized by the individual Chartists. By 1989, fortified by nearly two thousand signatories, countless active supporters (who either chose to sign Charter 77 or were advised not to sign it so that they could remain more effective by involving themselves in of the Charter’s activities “under cover”), and the silent sympathy of many more on the periphery, Charter 77 was the longest-running human rights movement in communist Europe.

As early as 1981, when Gordon Skilling published his seminal contribution on the subject, *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*, Western observers quickly grasped the significance of the human rights movements in communist Europe and the potential challenge they posed to the ruling regimes. More recently, some scholars have even argued that neither the arms race, nor the Gorbachev reforms, nor the decrepit state of the Soviet economy played as crucial a role in the downfall of communism as the activities of the various opposition groups, including Charter 77. Thus, in his

2001 study entitled *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, Daniel Thomas “traces the weakening of Communist rule not to Gorbachev’s reforms but to the unprecedented social movement and opposition activity that emerged across the East bloc in the aftermath of the Helsinki Final Act.” Thomas demonstrates in some detail how in the situation resulting from the human rights accords articulated at Helsinki, the interplay of new international norms and networks fortified dissident groups and opposition forces in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Soviet Union. In another recent study, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe*, Barbara Falk celebrates the contribution that dissidents in East Central Europe have made to political theory in general. In Falk’s view, activists such as those comprising Charter 77 “drew a line between politics and morality that effectively changes our perspective on politics,” refining Western notions of civil society and enhancing our understanding and expectations of “human rights as theory and practice.”

CURRENT CZECH VIEWS OF CHARTER 77

In light of such assessments, it may come as a surprise that in Prague the significance of Charter 77 remains a subject of continuing controversy and that its image has undergone dramatic changes over the past fifteen years. As František Kautman, a literary historian and one of the original Charter signatories, has noted:

Since 1990, the Charter is a source of polemics inside our contemporary society. In November and December 1989, the public viewed the Chartists as the legendary fearless knights on white horses wearing saints’ haloes. But before long, the Charter was targeted by some critics as an association of suspect individuals, which came or was brought together by God-knows-who for God-knows-what reasons. Internal disputes among the Chartists also helped to deal blows to the Charter’s image . . .

Jan Macháček, a distinguished Czech columnist, recently noted that no conference, seminar, or public discussion was organized in Prague on the occasion of the Charter’s thirtieth anniversary. “It is in a way typical of Czechs,” Macháček wrote. “They simply do not respect themselves and their memory.” Petr Zídek, a young Czech historian who makes a living as a journalist, pointed out that “two decades after the change of regime, professional historians could not sweat out a single book-length study concerning Charter 77.” His observation elicited a reply from Vilém Prečan, a “professional historian,” and one who also served as the Charter’s unofficial archivist while he was in (German) exile. Prečan did not contest Zídek’s main charge but instead—quoting from his 1995 speech—offered an explanation:

The task of writing a history of these events with a critical distance awaits the next generation of historians, who will not be burdened by their own past in the 1950s or the ’70s or ’80s, which would otherwise guide their pen in this or that fashion or prevent them from seeing things clearly. These upcoming historians, educated by and familiar with documentary sources collected by their predecessors . . . will perhaps be able to analyze with a certain critical sympathy the difficult process of self-liberation of Czech society from the deadly spiritual disease of communism . . . without glorifying

whatever and whomever . . . without acting like that large portion of their Czech contemporaries from the first half of the 1990s, who today turn away with distaste from their recent past only because it didn't turn out the way they wish it had.

Over the years, Prečan has done more than any other historian to collect Charter's "documentary sources." Upon returning from his fifteen-year exile, he became the founding director of Prague's Institute of Contemporary History. By March of 1990, his edited volume of Charter's key documents had already appeared in print. In 1997, he co-edited a collection of firsthand reminiscences by Chartists; and two years later, he had a hand in the preparation of a series of Charter-related documents taken from the archives of the Communist Party.

Prečan has also been one of the main protagonists in a long-running debate among Czech historians and commentators concerning the ultimate effectiveness of the Charter's resistance against the totalitarian regime, and its contribution to the fall of communism. This debate first erupted in public in 1995. The first round began with the publication of Milan Otáhal's 1994 study entitled *Opposition, Power, Society, 1969–1989*, in which Otáhal, an old friend of Prečan and a Charter signatory himself, put forward the thesis that the "actual real political significance" of Charter 77 was "minimal. It reflected the interests of a small group of afflicted intellectuals, not the majority of the population, and it didn't produce a more massive movement within the society." Prečan responded by taking Otáhal to task, contending that the work of his colleague at the Institute of Contemporary History suffered from flawed methodology, biased judgment, and a substantive misreading of the evidence of Charter's very real contribution and significance. In his view, Otáhal's study ignored all the evidence that did not accord with his own biases, as was demonstrated by his dismissal of Havel's (and the Charter's) emphasis on the moral basis of human and political action (as expressed in Havel's landmark essay, "The Power of the Powerless," and elsewhere). According to Prečan, Otáhal also revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of human rights dissent, which sought to improve the lot of the entire society and reflected more than just the interests of "afflicted intellectuals." While Otáhal has subsequently issued a response to Prečan's nearly forty-page critique, both historians have essentially stuck to their guns. In the most recent (2005) iteration of Otáhal's argument, he insists that "Public acceptance of Charter 77 was scant . . . The Charter became a closed fraternity of morally 'pure' people and dissent; owing to its own culpability, it found itself in a ghetto."

It is, of course, hardly unusual for two historians to arrive at different interpretations of events. But Charter 77 has not yet receded entirely into the past; most Chartists are still alive, and the general understanding of Charter's impact is of considerable importance for contemporary Czech politics. As the old expression goes, "the fish rots from the head." To capture the sense of the recent shift in the evaluation of Charter's overall significance, it is worth noting that in November 2003, Václav Havel's successor, Václav Klaus, during his first year as Czech president, chose the fourteenth anniversary of the November 1989 revolution to celebrate the behavior of "masses of ordinary citizens" whose passivity and quiet life under totalitarianism, Klaus claimed, had succeeded in fatally undermining the communist regime. According to Klaus,

the masses of ordinary citizens did more for the fall of communism than the “various opposition groups,” comprised mostly of ex-communist intellectuals. The thinly veiled purpose of this historical revisionism was to diminish the contribution that dissidents, especially the Chartists, had made to the struggle against communist tyranny, and therefore by implication to exculpate the behavior of the silent majority, which at best, like the current president himself, had gone along with the rituals of the communist game, and at worst, actively collaborated with the repressive regime. And indeed, as if to underline his disdain for dissidents, in January 2007, in the traditional presidential New Year’s address—the date of which this year coincided with the Charter’s thirtieth anniversary—Klaus made no mention whatsoever of Charter 77. This pointed omission seems to give credence to the old adage that “history is the politics of the present projected into the past.”

The interplay of history and politics over the past quarter century helps to explain why the Czechs have had a hard time sorting out the Charter 77 phenomenon. (For a variety of reasons, only a few Slovaks joined Charter 77, so it makes sense to think of the movement as essentially a Czech affair. In Slovakia, dissent largely took the form of religious protest.) Even as far back as 1993, in a survey of Czech public opinion taken at that time, 51 percent of respondents admitted that they knew so little about Charter 77 that they couldn’t form an opinion about its contribution. About equal proportions of respondents (22 percent and 25 percent, respectively) believed that Charter 77 either systematically prepared the end of the communist regime or that it had had no impact on the fall of communism because the collapse of that regime was coming anyway. When the same questions were posed in 2004, the number of respondents who knew very little about Charter 77 declined to 38 percent, while 28 percent of respondents credited the Charter with facilitating the end of communism and 31 percent didn’t think it made any difference. When asked in 1993 what motivated people to sign Charter 77, 15 percent of respondents believed they had been motivated by material benefits offered by the West, while 73 percent indicated that the Chartists had been motivated by a critical attitude toward the communist regime and the battle against it; that figure had declined to 62 percent by 2004. That two out of five Czechs still claim to know too little about what Charter 77 represented to assess its importance suggests why coming to terms with their past is no easy matter.

Another element in this situation is the enduring presence of the Communist Party (KSČM), which has regularly garnered 10 to 18 percent of the popular vote in parliamentary elections during the decade from 1996 to 2006. Unlike Havel, who refused to meet with KSČM leaders throughout his thirteen years as president, Klaus was elected to the presidency with communist support and he undoubtedly calculates that their support will be needed for his reelection. Because they have been excluded from all post-1989 governments, the communists are, in part, automatic beneficiaries of the protest vote against any perceived inadequacies in the government record. Moreover, in another sense, they have remained an integral part of the country’s political spectrum. After 1945, Czechoslovakia’s communists built a mass-based party that enrolled much of the adult population in its ranks. In a 1997 poll, nearly 25 percent of respondents indicated that at one time or another they had belonged to the Party.

The KSČM today—the only Communist Party in the region that has remained faithful to its name—appears by most measures unreformed and unwilling to confront its own unsavory past. Yet there would seem to be no doubt that the Party's defense of the communist regime continues to find some resonance with the public. Even as late as 2005, surveys of public opinion showed that about 25 percent of respondents still believed that the communist regime was superior to the current one.

As it happens, though, neither Macháček's nor Zídek's observations cited earlier about the relative contemporary neglect of Charter 77 can be considered entirely accurate or fair. Unbeknownst to Macháček, in January 2007, to commemorate the movement's thirtieth anniversary, the National Museum in Prague launched a new exhibit, "Charter 77 and Its Era." And in March, Prague hosted a major international conference on the subject of Charter 77. Czech (public, state-owned) television showed several reruns of Charter-related documentaries and launched a weekly series of ten programs entitled "The Women of Charter 77." The thirtieth anniversary was also noted by most daily newspapers, several of which prepared special coverage of the event. To this writer, at least, it appeared that the Charter's thirtieth anniversary received more attention and notice than any previous one. One might speculate that the departure from politics of most Chartists, including Havel, had something to do with this.

NEW SOURCES

A number of detailed scholarly studies concerning various aspects of the resistance to communism, including Charter 77, have also appeared in recent years. In 1997, a team of editors brought out a valuable collection of (mostly) autobiographical reflections by Chartists. Entitled *Charter 77 Through Chartist Eyes: Twenty Years Later*, the volume also includes a questionnaire and revealing responses from more than forty Chartists and other activists who worked against the regime. A three-year oral history project headed by Miroslav Vaněk, comprising interviews with forty-three former party officials and seventy-seven dissidents, came to fruition in 2005–06 in the form of three massive volumes, provocatively entitled *The Victors? The Vanquished?* Another recent collection edited by Petr Blažek focuses (as its title suggests) on the role of *Opposition and Resistance Against the Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia, 1968–1989*. One of the welcome features of Blažek's volume is that it relies on new materials from the archives of the Communist Party, as well as its ministry of interior. The repressive role of the latter has been illuminated by the steady stream of documentary publications by the government's Office for the Documentation and Investigation of Crimes of Communism. These studies have been complemented by a growing list of autobiographical accounts by the Chartists themselves.

What, one might ask, are we now learning about Charter 77 that we didn't already know? Collectively, these publications shed some new light on the trials and tribulations of many activists, particularly outside of Prague—their motivations to join the movement, their ability to resist the considerable pressure from the regime—as well as on the internal debates inside the Charter group concerning various tactics of resistance, on the perceptions of Charter in the ruling circles, and on the latter's

strategy to extinguish the movement. We learn a good deal less, however, about the crucial significance of outside support, especially in Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Scandinavia, and the United States—support from various solidarity groups, particularly human rights organizations, from governments (including the invaluable contribution made by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe in disseminating information about the Charter inside Czechoslovakia), and from Czech exiles.

An unusual book that appeared at the end of 2006 demonstrates why reconstructing the Czech past still poses special challenges. Entitled *The Dialog File, The Secret Police versus Pavel Kohout*, it offers an inside view of how the secret police operated in its effort to eliminate dissent and resistance in the 1970s and the 1980s. Kohout remains a controversial figure in Prague because in the 1950s he was an ardent communist who rose to prominence as a Party writer and playwright, and during that same period he also collaborated with state security. In the 1960s, though, he turned critical of the regime, and by the end of the decade he had joined the opposition, becoming one of the architects of Charter 77; indeed, it was Kohout who suggested the movement's very name. As a result, he was continually harassed by the communist police, which used every trick in its repertoire to expel him from the country in 1979 and to strip him of his citizenship. In the end, *The Dialog File* really turns out to be less about Kohout and more about the ways and means the communist state could deploy to destroy an individual and to eliminate opposition.

Although in the heady days of November and December 1989 the secret police did its best to destroy the evidence of its repressive activities against the so-called "internal enemy," Kohout's file, however incomplete it might be, may well represent the fullest such record we will ever find. Based on nearly ten thousand pages of documentation, *The Dialog File* was an operation launched by state security as early as 1970. It contains reports on Kohout's activities in forced exile in Austria all the way up to 1989. Though state security no longer relied on the vicious terror tactics it had employed in the 1950s, *The Dialog File* is a disturbing testimony to the long reach of the communist secret police in the 1970s and 1980s.

As Kohout himself estimates, during the two decades that he was the subject of Czechoslovak state security's interest, nearly one thousand of its employees were kept busy working on his case. Unlike the Stasi agents portrayed in the recent film *Das Leben der Anderen* [*The Lives of Others*], the real life operatives who fill the pages of this book seem altogether free of romantic notions and reveal themselves to be deadly serious about their business. The documents are rich in evidence of how Kohout's movements and correspondence were being closely monitored and controlled, his telephones tapped, and homes bugged. We learn, for example, that state security obtained the first indication of the eventual birth of Charter 77 on December 10, 1976, by means of listening devices planted in Kohout's apartment. Other documents show how the secret police manipulated the court system; arrested Kohout's wife, another Charter signatory, and considered locking her up in an insane asylum; expelled his daughter from school; planted false information to discredit Kohout in the eyes of other Chartists; and so on.

We can also read the confidential and almost tongue-in-cheek reports about how Kohout's dog was poisoned by somebody (you have three guesses!), and about the

mystery of a bomb planted under his car, an incident connected to an elaborate blackmail scheme. The element of mystery is significantly reduced when one learns that the bomb was planted while Kohout's car was parked in a police parking lot. It is worth noting that activities like these were all outside the law: that is to say, they were all violations of laws that existed at the time. Still, as the book's editor, Radek Schovánek, points out, after 1989 no one was investigated, much less prosecuted, on account of any of these acts of repression.

As he makes clear in his afterword, Kohout is particularly troubled by the role of almost three hundred secret informers, state security collaborators who filed nearly eight hundred reports on him over the years. When in 1998 Kohout first discovered that among those who spied on him were close friends who had never admitted as much, he publicly—though without revealing their identity—implored them to acknowledge what they'd done to him. But he apparently heard back from no one. Under these circumstances, *The Dialog File* chooses to name names. In addition to offering short biographies of some of the most active employees of state security who were responsible for orchestrating and carrying out the actual acts of repression, the book also reveals the identities of those who served as police informers. In this way, *The Dialog File* lifts the curtain on what has previously remained unknown, and we begin to see what Chartists were really up against in the Czechoslovakia of the era of so-called “normalization,” the period from 1969 to 1989 during which the regime purged reformers and exercised rigid control and ideological orthodoxy. The book reminds us, in case we needed any reminding, that the Gustav Husák regime in Prague in the 1970s and '80s was a classic instance of the police state.

According to the newly accessible records of state security, by January 20, 1977, only two weeks after the launching of Charter 77, the head of the political interrogation section had proudly reported to his superiors that 200 of the 242 original Charter signatories had already been subjected to questioning, many of them multiple times, and forty-one house searches had been carried out. At the same time, the state prosecutor set out to prepare a list of charges. The public face of the crackdown took the form of a vicious smear campaign in the media combined with mounting pressure on virtually the entire creative and performing arts community to join the regime in publicly denouncing the Charter. Dubbed unofficially the “Anti-Charter,” this campaign went on for several weeks until it produced more than seven thousand Anti-Charter signatures. In a situation reminiscent of the Stalinist 1950s, hundreds of names were reported daily by the communist-controlled media and reprinted in the newspapers. The immediate goal of the crackdown was to strike a chord of fear in the society at large, so as to discourage others from signing the Charter. The demeaning fashion in which the country's leading artists and members of the intelligentsia were called upon to lend their names to the regime's campaign of denunciation was made all the more palpable by the fact that none of the signatories of the Anti-Charter proclamations was allowed an opportunity to read the text they were all required to denounce. By way of explanation, in the midst of this campaign, on February 24, 1977, minister of interior Jaromír Obzina warned a closed gathering of Party cadres that the Charter 77 text is “so sophisticated that if it were published, 90 percent of

the population would not understand how dangerous it is, and about two million would be prepared to sign it immediately.”

Unwittingly, by operating in this way, the regime gave Charter and the cause of human rights huge publicity. It is significant that hundreds chose to sign Charter 77 *after* the campaign against it was launched, knowing full well the likely repercussions of their decision to do so. While Kohout was by 1977 a prominent writer based in Prague whose travails were followed with considerable attention by the international media, the odds were that an average Chartist in the Czech countryside or living in a small town would be considerably more vulnerable. Particularly exposed were those who volunteered to act as Charter’s three spokespersons and who were authorized to issue Charter’s “official” documents and statements. When Charter 77 was launched, Jan Patočka, Václav Havel, and Jiří Hájek, the 1968 Prague Spring’s minister of foreign affairs, acted as the first trio. Patočka, a philosopher, who was the spiritual leader of the Charter, asserted that “There are some things worth suffering for, and the things for which one might suffer . . . make life worth living.” He died in March 1977, shortly after writing those lines, following a series of lengthy interrogation sessions by state security. For his part, Havel was arrested in January and endured several months of the first of his many detentions. Upon his release in May 1977, Havel stepped down as the Charter’s spokesman—though he subsequently returned to this position again. Many of the thirty-two succeeding spokespersons between 1977 and 1989 racked up long prison terms and experienced constant harassment.

It is notable that during this period eleven women acted as Charter’s spokespersons, bearing the full brunt of the state’s assault. Similarly, women made up one third of the members of VONS (the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted). Other women chartists, like Vlasta Chramostová, led the way in such Charter-sponsored initiatives as underground theater. Still others, like Jiřina Šiklová, who for years acted as a conduit of *samizdat* smuggling and functioned as a center of communication with the outside world, showed astonishing courage under pressure. Kamila Bendová’s recent account and the current television series focusing on the women of Charter 77 offer compelling evidence of the ways in which the power of female imagination, perseverance, courage, and hope sustained many of Charter 77’s activities.

As the materials from the archives reveal, after the initial wave of repression failed to shut down Charter 77, the state security under the Communist Party’s direction adopted a multiprong strategy, attempting to penetrate Charter with its own agents, blackmail Chartists into covert cooperation, and expel leading Chartists from the country; in addition, security agents conducted a disinformation campaign that was to sow discord inside the Charter so as to paralyze its effectiveness and discredit it in the eyes of the wider public. State security plans for 1982 regarding the “internal enemy” still included the explicit goal of eliminating Charter 77 altogether. The all-out campaign of repression culminated during 1979–82, especially in connection with the rise of the Solidarity movement in neighboring Poland. On May 29, 1979, the entire leadership of VONS was arrested, and, subsequently, ten of its members, all leading Chartists, were charged with actions against the state. In September of that year, Otka Bednářová, Václav Benda, Jiří Dienstbier, Václav Havel, Dana Němcová, and Petr

Uhl all received stiff prison terms, while the remaining four who stood accused were conditionally released, though the charges against them, which remained pending until 1989, could serve as a pretext for another round of arrests at any time.

One of the four, Václav Malý, a Catholic priest who agreed to serve as one of three Charter spokespersons during 1981, has indicated his belief that at that moment the fate of Charter 77 hung in the balance. As he explains in a recent account, the Communist Party police state's tightening noose around the Charter meant that its three spokespersons could meet only two or three times that year. At that point, most Chartists had ceased to be active: indeed, Malý suggests that in 1981 only a small circle of six to ten determined Chartists, those who persevered, sustained the possibility of the movement's continuation. As we know today, state security plans for 1982 concerning the "internal enemy" stipulated the clear goal of eliminating Charter's spokespersons and preventing others from taking their place.

In the end, what is remarkable is not how perilously close Charter 77 came to being shut down, but rather that despite the original expectation of the ruling Party elite, which directed the enormous state security apparatus, the Chartists could not be made to give up their commitments, nor could they all be expelled from the country (though many were); nor did it turn out that their voices were extinguished or their activities stopped. After 1989, in light of the revelations from the previously communist-controlled archives, a conspiracy theory of sorts began to take hold in some Prague circles that Charter 77 had been completely penetrated by the state security and therefore that its activities had been pretty much directed by communist agents. (The mirror image of this conspiracy theory was held by those in the highest echelons of the ruling Party and the secret police; in those circles, though, the Chartists were seen as being run by Western spy agencies and hostile powers. That is why so many interrogators repeatedly demanded to know from the Chartists: "who is it that directs you?") But the evidence we have at our disposal today makes this twisted notion of conspiracy indefensible. Though the original 242 signatories did include a handful of state security agents, none of the *agents provocateurs* rose to prominence to influence the inner core's deliberations and decisions. While various informants spied on individual Chartists, and phones and apartments were frequently bugged and communications intercepted, the state security never succeeded in enrolling its agents among Charter's spokespersons. Nor could it break the determination of most activists to serve the cause. When ten members of VONS were arrested in 1979, twelve others quickly volunteered to replace them.

Thus, against all odds, as the 1980s rolled on, evidence from the Party archives shows growing alarm at the highest level that Charter 77 was winning greater influence, gaining new supporters among the young, and spawning new independent groups. VONS, for example, issued more than eleven hundred reports on the plight of the "unjustly persecuted" by the end of 1989. And a 1987 internal security memo in the files of general secretary Gustav Husák concludes that compared to 1986, the first three months of the year showed "a significant rise in the intensity of Charter-sponsored activities," "whose overall goal is to create a mass base, to enlist young people and spread its influence into other regions."

The confluence of changes wrought by Mikhail Gorbachev inside the USSR and the growing disaffection with the ossified regime in Prague, combined with Charter's own decade-old record of regime defiance, emboldened other activists to organize themselves. While in 1987 there were only five independent initiatives or dissident groups, within two years there were thirty-nine such groups, and most of them included Chartists among their members.

Underlying the regime's nearly hysterical response to Charter 77's appearance was the recognition that the movement represented a major threat to its ruling monopoly. As Gordon Skilling noted twenty-five years ago (in what is still the best book on the subject), Charter 77 represented—notwithstanding its disclaimers—determined opposition to the regime. After all, it expressed resistance to major policies of those in power and demanded alternatives. Had those in power complied with Charter's demands, they would have put themselves out of business. While Skilling did not think that Charter 77 had any real impact on government policy, it seems to me that the evidence we now have regarding the party's internal deliberations suggests otherwise. Under the intensifying pressure coming from increasing disaffection at home, on the one hand, and from the impact of Gorbachev's embrace of *perestroika* and *glasnost* on the other, the immobilized regime in Prague desperately sought to secure its survival by belatedly addressing some of the festering problems previously identified by Charter 77. But its efforts proved to be too little and too late. Surveying the course of the regime's collapse, the communists' last Soviet-era leader, Miloš Jakeš, gives credit where credit is due:

One of the first steps that in the long run contributed to the deconstruction of the socialist system in Czechoslovakia was the abuse of the Helsinki conference in 1975, when the West got its way in terms of getting its conception of human rights and freedoms accepted. This step encouraged internal opposition, comprised of former party functionaries and members, who together with a small group of intellectuals like Havel and others founded Charter 77. The Charter did, on the face of it, demand above all a dialogue, but in practice, it began to pursue activities aiming at the decomposition of the existing regime. Its members then launched a series of other organizations. Under the influence of the Charter even the émigré circles got activated. Charter had at its disposal Western radio broadcasts in Czech and Slovak. Charter's leading personalities were being popularized by every means. A new situation emerged for the activities of dissident groups when the Soviet Union launched *perestroika* in 1986 . . .

CHARTER 77 AND THE CULTIVATION OF LEADERSHIP

In *Politics as Leadership*, Robert Tucker argues that the essence of politics is leadership and that the process of leadership involves three related tasks: first, diagnosing or defining a problem situation authoritatively; second, devising a course of action intended to alleviate the problem; third, mobilizing the political community's support for the political leader's definition of the situation and for the proposed course of action. Tucker observes that in some circumstances leaders manage to emerge who do not owe their influence to any position in the existing hierarchy of power. He calls such figures non-constituted leaders, and as examples, he mentions Andrei Sakharov

in the USSR and Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book *Silent Spring* became the charter document of the environmental movement in the United States. Such leaders are typically associated with movements for significant social change, which arise when leadership by constituted authority has proven to be inadequate.

When Charter 77 was launched, Czechoslovakia was deep in the throes of “normalization.” Gustav Husák, immortalized by the novelist Milan Kundera as the president of organized forgetting, personified the ruling elite. Charter 77 defined the problem situation in terms of the state’s failure to respect basic human rights and the obligation to uphold its international commitments. Calling upon fellow citizens to assume civic responsibility, it proposed to do away with the pretense of genuine socialism; the aim was “to live in truth,” as Václav Havel put it, or in the words of literary historian Václav Černý, to “restore the moral backbone, revive the respect for law, justice, and human dignity,” or as the Slovak philosopher Miroslav Kusý asserted, to “tear down the whole ideological façade of genuine socialism.”

At least four factors made Charter an enduring challenge to the regime. First, the language of Charter 77—in contrast to the empty, wooden, and ideology-driven official rhetoric—was plain and persuasive because it addressed immediate issues that many people experienced firsthand. Second, the human rights consensus enabled the Chartists to bring together ex-communists, anti-communists, liberals, intellectuals, workers, religious believers, and the adversarial cultural underground in a potentially potent union. The diversity of opinion inside Charter 77 was far more representative of public opinion in the society at large than the Party’s artificially imposed pretense of national unity. Third, the timely linkage to the Helsinki process brought in a crucial international dimension. Constructed within Czechoslovakia, Charter 77 was impeded by the police state—in Tucker’s language—in its efforts to generate large-scale public support for its definition of the problem situation, but it succeeded in mobilizing an international constituency of like-minded supporters for its cause. Finally, the moral commitment to live in truth served as a magnet for a self-selected number of Chartists who showed exceptional courage under pressure, a sense of altruism, remarkable power of imagination, and an unyielding determination to live in accordance with their conscience. Along with Jan Patočka, they truly believed that “There are some things worth suffering for . . .” and they chose to join a movement based on Patočka’s “solidarity of the shaken.” In this way, the Chartists demonstrated leadership through their example.

By insistently documenting human rights violations, by defining and analyzing other urgent and festering problems in the “normalized” society, and by sketching out an alternate future based on moral renewal, the Chartists effectively provided non-constituted leadership for a leaderless society in crisis. The Charter years also served as a leadership school for many activists whose political experience and ongoing education in the ways of civil society became a priceless asset in a society utterly lacking democratic habits. As Martin Palouš, a former Charter spokesperson and now the Czech ambassador to the U.N., aptly concluded, Charter 77 “created an environment in which people could learn again to live in the public sphere, to examine the state of common affairs, and at the same time not let slip the moment when it was necessary

to act—when it was necessary to leave the parallel polis and begin to make (with everything this implied) real politics, ‘political’ politics.”

As a consequence, in the aftermath of 1989, Charter 77 became the natural home of new leaders who enjoyed trust in a morally depleted environment. Václav Havel’s leading authority within Charter 77—uniformly acknowledged by fellow Chartists—rendered him a logical choice for the role of a constituted leader in 1989. Thanks to the Charter’s ethos of tolerance for diversity of opinions and its emphasis on a consensual style of deliberations, a style which derived from its experience of what Eva Kantůrková, a writer and Charter spokesperson, called “cultivated responsibility,” Charter 77’s influence proved decisive in giving the 1989 revolution what came to be known as its velvet character. In November of 1989 students chanted “Charter, Charter!” plastering copies of the original statement on many a wall in the city of Prague. As it happened, for many Czechs this was the first opportunity they’d had to read the nearly thirteen-year-old document that had succeeded in creating a new situation.