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# The Velvet Revolution:

A Case Study in Strategic Nonviolence

By

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**Abstract:** The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia provides a unique case of the successful use of strategic nonviolence. This paper will seek to provide a basic background of the causal events leading to the revolution in 1989. After establishing a suitable background from which to frame the analytical portion of the paper, it will be asked what role nonviolence played in the movement and how that nonviolence was applied strategically to facilitate its goals. In doing so, this paper will draw upon the research of Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, two leading nonviolent theorists, and their twelve principles of strategic nonviolence. Drawing upon the events of the Velvet Revolution in the context of these principles, it should become apparent that while the nonviolence of the Velvet Revolution was largely based in the highly principled rhetoric of its leaders, nonviolence was applied well within the strategic principles laid out by Ackerman and Kruegler, contributing to the overwhelming success of the revolution as a whole.

**I. Introduction.** When examining the Velvet Revolution, it is easy to limit one's focus to only the events of November 1989 and see a spontaneous, unexpected, and rapid transition of power. This however paints a picture far from complete. It is more accurate to recognize the events of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 in the context of Communist rule and Soviet influence over Czechoslovakia. It is only by doing this that one can see not a spontaneous revolution, but the culmination of events that began as early as 1968.

Prior to 1989, the former Czechoslovakia had been under Soviet control since the Red Army ousted Nazi occupiers during World War II. In 1948 Communist rule became official with a successful *coup d'état*.<sup>1</sup> Following that, Stalinism was rigidly enforced in Czechoslovakia as it was across the entire Soviet bloc. This meant that almost all property was nationalized by the Czechoslovak Communist Party and those families who had previously been among the upper classes were ostracized by their government and society at large. In cases of the wealthiest families, members were often kept separate from the rest of society as they were expelled from schools and often denied employment.<sup>2</sup>

Years later, with Nikita Khrushchev now in power in the Soviet Union, the policy of Stalinism was publicly denounced. This combined with what was perceived as an embarrassment for Khrushchev in the Cuban Missile Crisis created a relaxation of previously repressive policies. This is often referred to as the "thaw."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ritter, Daniel P. "Civil Society and the Velvet Revolution: Mobilizing for Democracy in Czechoslovakia," *COSMOS* (2012): 5-29.

<sup>2</sup> Crain, Caleb. "Havel's Spectre." *Nation* 294, no. 15 (April 9, 2012): 27-32.

<sup>3</sup> Bushkovitch, Paul (2012). *A Concise History of Russia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. 413-459.

By the time these reforms reached Czechoslovakia it was already 1968 and Khrushchev had lost all power and authority within the Soviet system. Here reform came much slower than in the rest of the Eastern bloc, and when reforms did come they were far and away the most progressive reforms to date.<sup>4</sup> Under the leadership of Alexander Dubček, the First Party Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, an “Action Program” was established. Dubček’s program “called for the abolition of censorship, the systematic use of opinion polls in the decision making process, the inclusion of a multiplicity of groups and organizations in the administration of the state, open debate with representatives of ‘bourgeois ideology,’ the right to travel abroad, further rehabilitation of the unjustly persecuted, the replacement of incompetent officials, changes to the electoral system, devolution of power in the party, [and] the introduction of a socialist market economy.”<sup>5</sup> This caught not only the attention of the Soviet Union, causing it great anxiety over the prospect of the fall of Soviet Communism in a neighboring satellite, but also the attention of the foreign press who endowed this brief era of reform with the title “Prague Spring.”<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately at the time these reforms were taking place Leonid Brezhnev was completing his rise to power in the Soviet Union and the Brezhnev Doctrine was adopted, which called for absolute Soviet control across the entire Eastern bloc.<sup>7</sup> So, under this newly unrelaxed doctrine, the Soviet Union along with other Warsaw Pact forces invaded Czechoslovakia in the winter of 1969.<sup>8</sup> Dubček, aware that the Czechoslovak army was no match for Warsaw Pact forces, ordered troops to remain confined to their barracks and advised that citizens

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<sup>4</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Shepherd, Robin H. E. (2000). *Czechoslovakia: The Velvet Revolution and Beyond*. Houndmills, UK: MacMillan.

<sup>6</sup> Bushkovitch, 443.

<sup>7</sup> Bushkovitch, 444.

<sup>8</sup> Washington Post, (Final Edition), 21 August 1968, pA11.

remain peaceful during the occupation. However, the Soviets were by this point determined to crush any air of reform sentiment and swiftly removed Dubček from power as First Party Secretary, installed Gustav Husák as the new President of Czechoslovakia, undid all reforms that had been instituted, and began intense repression of any freedom of expression under a policy which would be referred to as “normalization.”<sup>9</sup> This meant that not only was public dissent or dissatisfaction with the government not allowed, but nothing could be published, written, announced, or even mentioned in private conversation that did not fall in line with the Soviet worldview and official ideology.<sup>10</sup> Following the invasion, repression of what amounted to free-will was enforced with the most intensity in Czechoslovakia.<sup>11</sup>

These repressive policies were enforced time and time again, with particular emphasis on the limitation of artistic expression, as writers and musicians and actors and others belonging to artistic professions were blacklisted or even prosecuted and imprisoned.<sup>12</sup> However, the persecution of one rock band in particular would lead to the first small sprouting of an official dissident force in Czechoslovakia. The band was called The Plastic People of the Universe and in 1977 they were convicted of “organized disturbance of the peace” and incarcerated.<sup>13</sup> In protest against this, several key intellectuals and artists created the seminal

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<sup>9</sup> Glenn, John K. “Competing Challengers and Contested Outcomes to State Breakdown: The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.” *Social Forces*, 78, no. 1 (September 1999): 187-213.

<sup>10</sup> Havel, Vaclav. “The Power of the Powerless.” October 1978, [vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=clanky&val=72\\_aj\\_clanky.html&tpy=HTML](http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=clanky&val=72_aj_clanky.html&tpy=HTML).

<sup>11</sup> Judt, Tony R. (1992) “Metamorphosis: The Democratic Revolution in Czechoslovakia.” Pp. 96-116 in *Eastern Europe in Revolution*, ed. By Ivo Banac. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Yanosik, Joseph. “The Plastic People of the Universe.” *Perfect Sound Forever* (March 1996).

dissident document against the Czechoslovak government, Charter 77, named for its year of inception.<sup>14</sup>

The Charter itself did little as an official document of dissent. It took painstaking efforts to protect its signatories from arrest, making sure to note that no official organization was being established against the regime nor were they officially in dissent.<sup>15</sup> The charter only served to call attention to human rights treaties—the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the Final Act of the Helsinki Accords—which had been signed by the Czechoslovak government but remained blatantly unenforced throughout the country.<sup>16</sup> The charter only ever gained between 1,200 and 2,000 signatories, but gained symbolic notoriety. Ironically, this fame was largely bestowed upon the dissidents by the Czechoslovak government as it reacted with intensity against the charter and its major signatories. Those who co-authored the document were relentlessly persecuted following the charter's inception. The ferocity with which the Czechoslovak government reacted also brought fame to the dissidents it persecuted. One man in particular, Václav Havel, was to be arrested shortly after the publication of the charter and he would emerge as the clear leader during the revolution in 1989.<sup>17</sup>

Havel was born into an immensely wealthy and even more famous family in Prague in 1936. His grandfather had been ambassador to Austria and Hungary and his father was a well-known real-estate tycoon.<sup>18</sup> The family owned a six-story mansion in Prague on the Vltava River as well as a few other properties throughout the country. Following the Communist coup in

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<sup>14</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> "Declaration of Charter '77." 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 6, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Michnik, Adam. "When Socrates became Pericles: Vaclav Havel's 'Great History,' 1936-2011." *Common Knowledge*, 18, no. 3 (2012): 387-418.

1948, Havel's family was stripped of nearly all of its wealth and property. The only living space afforded to the family following this was two small rooms at the top of their six-story mansion. Even the family's fine china, as one story goes, was nationalized by the Communist government. Havel, at this time just a young schoolboy, was expelled for his bourgeois background. During this period he took odd-jobs and occasionally attended night classes and began writing plays as a hobby in his free-time. During the thaw, Havel found commercial success as a playwright, publishing and producing *The Garden Party* in 1963. By 1968 and the Prague Spring, Havel had gained fame for his plays within Czechoslovakia and the rest of the world.<sup>19</sup> However, during the period of normalization he was blacklisted and his plays banned from production in Czechoslovakia.<sup>20</sup> Between the invasion in the winter of 1969 and his co-authorship of Charter 77 in 1977, Havel gained a reputation as a dissident essayist when he wrote "The Power of the Powerless," in which he attempted to expose to the public the falsehood and absurdity of the Communist government.<sup>21</sup> Because of his family background and growing reputation as a dissident, Havel was often placed under police surveillance.<sup>22</sup> It was not until 1977 that he would be arrested for the first time for distributing copies of Charter 77 on the streets of Prague.<sup>23</sup> During this first imprisonment he was persuaded to write a letter of apology and released from prison. The government published his letter to dissuade other dissidents, which largely discredited Havel and brought him a great deal of public embarrassment. This embarrassment however spurred Havel into a new dissident vigor and he

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<sup>19</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Michnik, *Common Knowledge*, 389.

<sup>21</sup> Matynia, Elzbieta. 2009. "Twenty Years Later: A Call for Existential Revolution: Vaclav Havel in Conversation with Adam Michnik." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, And Society* no. 3:255-262.

<sup>22</sup> Michnik, *Common Knowledge*, 389.

<sup>23</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 28.

spent his time between 1977 and 1989 in and out of prison.<sup>24</sup> Because of his flagrant dissident actions during these years, as well as his reputation as a successful playwright, as previously noted, Havel would emerge as the clear leader during the 1989 revolution.

By 1989 Mikhail Gorbachev had assumed control of the Soviet Union and instituted his reform policies of *glasnost*, which called for more openness in Soviet society, and *perestroika*, which called for the restructuring of the Soviet economy.<sup>25</sup> At this point Communism was losing its grasp on satellite countries throughout the Eastern bloc. The citizens of Czechoslovakia were increasingly mindful of this; the Berlin Wall had fallen in early November 1989 and with it any remaining notion legitimating Soviet rule.<sup>26</sup> Descriptions from the time indicate that people were just waiting for something to spark off the same change in Czechoslovakia.<sup>27</sup>

On November 17, 1989 that spark went off in a big way. It was International Students' Day, which had been established in memory of eight students that had been killed during the Nazi occupation 50 years earlier.<sup>28</sup> To commemorate this, a large gathering of Prague students met in Prague in memoriam of the students who had been killed. As the day went on an air of dissatisfaction with the government overwhelmed the demonstrators and the peaceful gathering turned into an anti-regime protest. The Czechoslovak government reacted swiftly to this, sending riot police to violently suppress the demonstrators. Eventually the riot police dispersed the crowd, but rumors began circulating that someone had been killed in the violence.<sup>29</sup> That night, a report confirming the death was broadcast over Radio Free Europe.

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<sup>24</sup> Michnik, *Common Knowledge*, 397-398.

<sup>25</sup> Bushkovitch, 448.

<sup>26</sup> Bushkovitch, 450.

<sup>27</sup> Matynia, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 257.

<sup>28</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 26.

Ironically, this turned out to be a false report and the man everyone thought was dead had merely fainted, but this provided a rallying point for the Czechoslovak dissidents and overnight Czechoslovak students and theaters across the country began striking.<sup>30</sup> In addition, numerous movements sprang up in dissent against the regime. Of these movements, one would emerge as an umbrella group for organized dissent under the leadership of Václav Havel calling itself Civic Forum.<sup>31</sup>

Given Havel's stature as a playwright, the striking theater networks naturally rallied around him and Civic Forum. Rather than close entirely, these theaters began holding individual civic fora in which to express public opinion openly and freely.<sup>32</sup> Using these as an organizational springboard, Civic Forum devised a set of relatively humble goals calling for the resignation of any officials who had been involved in normalization or any violent repression. In addition, they called for an investigatory committee to be formed to look into cases of violent repression as well as the release of all "prisoners of conscience."<sup>33</sup>

The leadership of Civic Forum recognized the need to demonstrate firmly the will and power of the Czechoslovak people. The student and theater strikes provided a firm base, and protests and rallies were held on a nearly daily basis following the events of November 17, but a greater show of force was necessary. So, Civic Forum called for a general strike of the entire nation to occur on November 27 and formed a coordination committee of Prague students to facilitate it.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 193-194.

<sup>31</sup> Krapfl, James. (2009). *Civic Forum, Public against Violence, and the Struggle for Slovakia*. UC Berkeley: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies.

<sup>32</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 200.

<sup>33</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 202.

<sup>34</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 193-194.

Civic Forum was a movement based on the ideal of cooperation and communication with the government and as such, the coordinators of the general strike formulated the parameters of the strike in such a way to avoid humiliating the government. They felt as though humiliating their opponents in such a way would not serve collaboration.<sup>35</sup> Therefore the strike was to occur only from noon to 2 p.m. on November 27, and would not include emergency or health services or public transportation.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the coordinating committee took care only to give vague guidelines on what to do during the strike, so smaller organizations could make that decision for themselves based on their unique situation.<sup>37</sup> Under these simple and peaceful guidelines, Civic Forum was able to successfully coordinate a nation-wide strike, with an estimated three-quarters of the population, well over 11 million people, participating in some fashion.<sup>38</sup>

It must have been obvious to the Communist government that the population would no longer consent to being ruled illegitimately, and the government allowed for far greater reforms than Civic Forum had asked for at its outset. On November 29, the clause of the Czechoslovak constitution that legitimated one-party rule by the Communist was stricken down. Shortly after, the first free elections in decades were held. On December 10, President Husák swore in the first non-communist Parliament since 1948 and promptly resigned his own office.<sup>39</sup> The assembly included 120 new members, only 8 of whom were Communist.<sup>40</sup> On

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<sup>35</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Wheaton, Bernard and Zdenek Kavan. 1992. *The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988-1991*. Westview Press. 204.

<sup>37</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 205.

<sup>38</sup> Wheaton and Kavan, 204.

<sup>39</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Calda, Milos. 1996. "The Roundtable Talks in Czechoslovakia." Pp. 135-177 in *The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*, ed. By Jon Elster. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

December 29, the new Parliament convened to elect a new President. Václav Havel was elected into office unanimously and a new “Government of National Understanding” was formed.<sup>41</sup>

The huge success achieved by Civic Forum during the Velvet Revolution presents a unique case in the implementation of strategic nonviolence. But what role did that nonviolence play in the revolution? What factors of the Velvet Revolution contributed to its strategic success? And what can future nonviolent strategists learn from it?

**II. The Role of Nonviolence.** To fully understand the impact nonviolence had on the Velvet Revolution, it is helpful not only to examine the rhetoric of the leadership, particularly that of Václav Havel, but also to examine how nonviolence was applied during the revolution.

In his highly influential essay “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel, in addition to exposing the absurd nature of the Soviet system, makes the claim that living life within the rules of the Communist regimes is tantamount to living a lie. Havel views this as a bastardization of genuine life that brings about a “crisis of human identity.” “A person,” he says, “who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his own personal survival, is a demoralized [person].” The antithesis of this, of someone living within a lie, would therefore to be to live within the truth. “Living within the truth,” Havel continues in the same essay, “as humanity’s revolt against an enforced position, is...an attempt to regain control over one’s own sense of responsibility...is clearly a moral act, not only because one must pay so dearly for it, but

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<sup>41</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 7.

principally because it is not self-serving.”<sup>42</sup> Sentiment expressed in “The Power of the Powerless” seems to reflect the principled non-violence advocated through Gandhi’s concept of *satyagraha*, which Gandhi also identified as “truth.”<sup>43</sup> Twenty years after the Velvet Revolution, Havel confirmed further similarities to Gandhi’s *satyagraha* in that he believed the ultimate “truth” was an individual effort<sup>44</sup>, and that one’s “truth” may not be the same as another’s.<sup>45</sup> “In the end, it’s about standing up for your principles, and vouching for your own truth.”<sup>46</sup>

When one reads only the rhetoric behind the nonviolence during the Velvet Revolution, it appears to be far more principled than strategic. However, the events of 1989 reveal a much different story. While Havel may have been calling for nonviolence as a moral imperative in the revolution, he and the other leaders of the revolution applied this principle with the strategic tact of a master chess player. Havel, in a lecture at Columbia University, attributed his strategic use of nonviolent sanctions during the Velvet Revolution to his experience as a playwright. This he said gave him a heightened awareness of when things should begin and when they should end.<sup>47</sup> This is reflected most clearly by the decision to make the general strike of November 27, 1989 only last two hours. The objective was not to cause disorder or harm to the government, only to express that the Czechoslovak people would no longer willingly be ruled under the

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<sup>42</sup> Havel, “The Power of the Powerless.”

<sup>43</sup> Bondurant, Joan V. “Satyagraha: Its Basic Precepts.” Pp. 15-35 in *Conquest of Violence*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>44</sup> Matynia, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 260.

<sup>45</sup> Bondurant, 19-21.

<sup>46</sup> Matynia, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 260.

<sup>47</sup> Havel, Vaclav. “The Core Contemporary Civilization Coursewide Lecture by President Havel.” Columbia video, November 10, 2006, <http://havel.columbia.edu/core.html>.

current *status quo*.<sup>48</sup> Clearly the message was received as intended as the government responded with equal civility and order.

Additionally, the nonviolent aspect of Civic Forum was framed not as a moral imperative, but as an effective counterpoint to the violent aggression of the regime. By highlighting the nonviolent nature of the protesting students as well as the violent nature of the repression they were met with on the November 17, Civic Forum effectively heightened the population's sense of moral outrage against the government.<sup>49</sup> It can therefore be said that while rooted in highly principled rhetoric and moral prescriptions, the nonviolent sanctions of the Velvet Revolution in 1989 were applied based upon highly strategic considerations as well.

**III. Strengths and Weaknesses.** Essential to any analysis of nonviolent conflict is the collaborative work of Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler entitled, appropriately, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*. In their book, the authors highlight twelve strategic principles that are crucial to success when utilizing nonviolent resistance. These are broken down into principles of development, engagement, and conception. In their case studies, the question is asked whether the movement achieved conformity, partial conformity, or nonconformity to each principle.<sup>50</sup> Below, the same will be asked of Civic Forum and the participants in the Velvet Revolution.

**Principles of Development:**

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<sup>48</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Glenn, John K. (2001). *Framing Democracy: Civil Society and Civic Movements in Eastern Europe*. Stanford, NY: Stanford University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Ackerman, Peter and Christopher Kruegler, (1994). *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 21-52.

**Form functional objectives.** Conformity. At its inception, Civic Forum established itself as an organization meant for communication and cooperation with the government.<sup>51</sup> Despite the massive changes occurring throughout the rest of the Soviet bloc, Civic Forum made very modest demands of the government, calling not for fundamental systemic changes, but simply for the resignation of Communist party members involved in “normalization,” the resignation of those responsible for the repression of the November 17 demonstrations, the establishment of an investigatory committee to look into the events of November 17, and the release of all “prisoners of conscience.”<sup>52</sup> The demands made by Civic Forum echoed the sentiments of one key Charter 77 signatory, who a year earlier stated “I do not believe it is the opposition’s job to solve the state’s problems...Of course, we can point out existing problems, we can discuss methods by which to solve the problems—but it is the government which must solve them.”<sup>53</sup>

By at first making only the humblest of demands of the government, Civic Forum successfully established credibility as a non-contentious organization aimed at reform, not revolution. This modesty fostered a discussion-based approach to reform as opposed to an approach based on contestation, and made the government far more willing to negotiate with representatives of Civic Forum. Had Civic Forum formed with less functional objectives and bolder demands, a good relationship with the government probably never would have been established from which to discuss the broader reform that inevitably took place.

**Develop organizational strength.** Conformity. Immediately following the events of November 17, numerous disjointed and disorganized groups sprang up in simultaneous yet not

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<sup>51</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 28.

<sup>52</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 202.

<sup>53</sup> Urban, Jan. “To Create Unsolvably Problems.” *Uncaptive Minds*, (June-July-August, 1988) 32-34.

unified dissent against the government.<sup>54</sup> These groups included the striking students and theater networks as well as several more political groups. These include a reform Communism movement that sought to establish “Socialism with a human face,” a Democratic Initiative that sought to rapidly democratize the nation, and a Slovak nationalist group that sought to end Czech centralism.<sup>55</sup> The final and most important approach taken however formed on the basis of basic human rights and the goal of a civil society. Among the groups that took this approach were the Civic Forum and its Slovakian counterpart, Public Against Violence.<sup>56</sup>

Although formed as two separate groups, Public Against Violence and Civic Forum were often referred to synonymously as simply Civic Forum. It was Civic Forum in this form that was able, under the leadership of Havel, to unite the theater networks and striking students into by far the more organized dissident group.<sup>57</sup>

After successfully uniting a firm base of support, Civic Forum sought to organize itself internally. Because of the disjointed nature of the formation of various civic fora across the country, leaders sought immediately to create a coordinating center in Prague to which all civic fora were to be connected. To contrast the hierarchical formation of the Communist party, Civic Forum organized this coordinating center into a three-tiered organization, but with ultimate power distributed horizontally. This structure consisted of a “crisis crew” which consisted of the leaders of Civic Forum, including Havel, which met daily to propose basic decisions. These decisions were later introduced to the “action group” of about twenty people and later to the

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<sup>54</sup> Krapfl, 3-5.

<sup>55</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 194-196.

<sup>56</sup> Krapfl, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 200-203.

plenum of around 150 people preceding the daily press conference.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the formation of a coordinating committee for the general strike provide pivotal as Prague students traveled and contacted various local civic fora to identify the measure and limitations of the strike.<sup>59</sup> Had Civic Forum failed to rapidly develop organizational strength, it is unlikely the general strike of November 27 would have mobilized as great a portion of the population as it did.

**Secure Access to Critical Resources.** Partial conformity. Civic Forum did little if any to finance their movement. It may even be argued that financial resources were inoperative in this circumstance as their goals did not inherently require any financing nor did their day-to-day functions. Various civic fora were established simply to encourage open political dialogue, and the already striking theaters provided a free space in which to do so.<sup>60</sup>

However, between the establishment of Charter 77 and the events of 1989, key dissident forces were able to acquire the means to print and distribute dissident literature. Despite the government bans on the printing of these documents, charter members were able to acquire and distribute copies of the text of Charter 77, Havel's "The Power of the Powerless," and other banned literature.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, due to the illegal nature of the distribution of these materials, those who did so, like Havel, spent much time during these years in prison; time they were unable to use to advance their efforts.<sup>62</sup>

**Cultivate external assistance.** Partial conformity. The Velvet Revolution attained a great deal of coverage by the international media. Even the name "Velvet Revolution" is a title given

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<sup>58</sup> Glenn, *Framing Democracy*, 181.

<sup>59</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 203-204.

<sup>60</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 27-28.

<sup>62</sup> Michnik, *Common Knowledge*, 397-398.

to it by the foreign press—they referred to it as the gentle revolution amongst themselves.<sup>63</sup> This international attention coupled with the general anti-Communist sentiment of the time period undoubtedly created a great deal of international support for the movement, but this never culminated in any direct influence over the revolution. Additionally, Havel later made note that it was critical to the movement that the Czechoslovak people handle the situation themselves in a mode of internal cooperation rather than international intervention.<sup>64</sup>

However, foreign involvement in the form of Radio Free Europe played an immensely critical role in inciting the revolution. The report that came across air waves the night of November 17, 1989 that a student had been killed by police forces assaulting a nonviolent protest, despite the fallacy of the report, proved to be the final straw for the Czechoslovak people. Opposition movements rallied in outrage over the dead student and there was no stopping the revolution afterwards.<sup>65</sup>

**Expand the repertoire of sanctions.** Conformity. It can be argued that the first nonviolent sanction imposed against the Czechoslovak government was the formation of Charter 77. This first official piece of dissident literature proved ineffective at the time, but marks the beginning of the struggle, or perhaps the continuation of the struggle after an extended pause during normalization.<sup>66</sup> Later, key dissidents expanded on this by beginning to distribute the text of the charter as well as other unapproved literature illegally.<sup>67</sup> Beyond this, little change was made to these sanctions until November of 1989.

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<sup>63</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Havel's lecture at Columbia.

<sup>65</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 26.

<sup>66</sup> Shepherd, *Revolution and Beyond*, 33.

<sup>67</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 28.

The Velvet Revolution began with a student protest and the government's response to it. The result was the immediate commencement of a strike of students and theaters.<sup>68</sup> After the events of November 17, Civic Forum along with various student and theater groups continued protests and strikes throughout the week.<sup>69</sup> Expanding on this, they began to distribute dissident literature as well as official Civic Forum brochures and handouts to the attendees of various civic fora. Additionally, press conferences and official statements were released by Civic Forum calling for the government to meet with them to discuss their demands as well as the problems facing the country.<sup>70</sup> The expansion of sanction culminated in the general strike of November 27. Select groups, students and theaters, had already been striking, but this general strike invited and was able to mobilize a massive portion of the population far beyond the scope of any previous strikes or demonstrations.<sup>71</sup>

### **Principles of Engagement:**

**Attack the opponent's strategies for consolidating control.** Conformity. More than anything else, the Communist method of maintaining control of the population was through repression and coercion. Any public expression following the Prague Spring was made illegal unless it was done through official channels, which maintained rigid censorship during normalization.<sup>72</sup> Oppositional forces targeted this squelching of public opinion by willfully subverting Communist censors by writing, printing, and distributing dissident literature.<sup>73</sup> In this regard the content of the dissident literature is irrelevant; simply by retaining the means to

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<sup>68</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 28.

<sup>70</sup> Glenn, *Framing Democracy*, 181.

<sup>71</sup> Wheaton and Kavan, 204.

<sup>72</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 27.

<sup>73</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 27-28.

publish these documents the dissident forces were able to attack this first method of government control.

Maintaining control through coercion proved to be a far more difficult consolidation strategy to take down. Beginning with the 'thaw' and the denunciation of Stalinism, the Soviet Union and its satellites began enforcing participation in the system not through threats of violence as it had previously, but by providing incentives for participation.<sup>74</sup> The approach of the government shifted from "spy on your neighbor for or we will kill you" to "spy on your neighbor and you will be rewarded." In Czechoslovakia simply becoming a member of the Communist Party meant that one would be rewarded with significant material advantages not afforded to non-party members.<sup>75</sup> To overcome this government coercion, the content of dissident literature requires further examination. Here the shortcomings of the regime were stressed to the population. Beginning with Charter 77 and included in nearly every dissident publication since was an emphasis on human rights violations. It was repeated over and over, despite signing various human rights treaties into law, that those laws remained unenforced.<sup>76</sup> Apparently by the end of 1989 the Czechoslovak population could no longer be bought into submission.

However, it was Havel who illustrated within "The Power of the Powerless" the most important method by which the Soviet system maintained control over its citizens. He first defines as a major difference between the Soviet system and other totalitarian systems—that typically a totalitarian dictatorship lacks historical roots. This, he says, is not the case with the

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<sup>74</sup> Glenn, *Framing Democracy*, 181.

<sup>75</sup> Judt, "Metamorphosis," 96-97.

<sup>76</sup> "Declaration of Charter '77," 1.

Soviet system. Here he says the roots of the Soviet system extend even beyond the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in 1917, and that everyone in small ways contributed every day to their own repression by doing small things like hanging party slogans in shop windows. They do these things, Havel says, because they are historically rooted. They continue to do things in certain ways because that is what has always been done.<sup>77</sup> The system at this point begins to automate itself.<sup>78</sup> By doing just these small everyday things “They [the people] must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, are the system.”<sup>79</sup> Simply by identifying it in his essay and then by virtue of its distribution by dissident forces, Havel here provides the biggest attack on Communist consolidation of power. A factory worker recalls being first introduced to Havel’s essay: “Then came the essay by Havel. Reading it gave us the theoretical underpinnings for our activity. It maintained our spirits; we did not give up, and a year later—in August 1980—it became clear that the party apparatus and the factory management were afraid of us. We mattered. And the rank and file saw us as leaders of the movement. When I look at the victories...of Charter 77, I see in them an astonishing fulfillment of the prophecies and knowledge contained in Havel’s essay.”<sup>80</sup> Havel exposed the absurdity of the system to the population at large, and by November 1989 the Czechoslovak population proved itself ready to be rid of it.

**Mute the impact of opponent’s violent weapons.** Conformity. As discussed earlier the Communist government rarely employed the use or threat of violence to enforce its rule

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<sup>77</sup> Havel, “The Power of the Powerless.”

<sup>78</sup> Crain, *Nation*, 30.

<sup>79</sup> Havel, “The Power of the Powerless.”

<sup>80</sup> Havel, “The Power of the Powerless.”

following the events of 1968 and '69. However, when the regime inevitably did resort to violence against the November 17 demonstrations, its impact was not only silenced, but turned around in full force against the government. Civic Forum used the violent repression as a rallying point for their cause and because of it was able to mobilize massive public support in only a few days.<sup>81</sup>

**Alienate opponents from expected bases of support.** Conformity. As with any other Soviet satellite, the Communist government in Czechoslovakia relied heavily on the power of their mother-nation, the Soviet Union itself. This was abundantly clear in 1969 when the Czechoslovak Communist party itself began instituting reforms, and the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact allies invaded with military force. Despite the fact that these reforms came from within the party, the message was clear that the newly installed President Husák would have full Soviet support and protection.<sup>82</sup> However, by the end of 1989 the Soviet Union under Gorbachev was far too involved in its own reforms and restructuring to provide the Czechoslovak Communist Party the same support it had shown previously.<sup>83</sup> As a result, the Communist government received no assistance from the Soviet government at the outbreak of the 1989 revolution.

As stated previously, the Soviet system was in place in Czechoslovakia for so long that the people themselves had become propagators of the system. Therefore the primary base of support was the people themselves, or more accurately, their lack of support for any

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<sup>81</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 204-205.

<sup>82</sup> Matynia, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 256-257.

<sup>83</sup> Skilling, H. Gordon. (1991). "Introductory Essay." Pp. 11 in *Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia*, ed. By H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson. Houndmills, UK. Macmillan.

opposition; their apathy towards the system.<sup>84</sup> After successfully attacking the government's strategies for consolidating its power, Civic Forum and the opposition successfully mobilized roughly 75% of the population against the government.<sup>85</sup> The government had lost the support of the people, and with them, any trace of legitimacy.

**Maintain nonviolent discipline.** Conformity. Because the student demonstrators who had been attacked on November 17 had managed to maintain their own nonviolent discipline and not attack the riot police in retaliation, Civic Forum was able to use their nonviolence as a major point of contrast with the government.<sup>86</sup> Therefore nonviolence because an inherent part of all civic fora throughout the country and it was professed at every meeting "Let us refuse any form of terror and violence. Our weapons are love and nonviolence."<sup>87</sup> Despite the presence of provocateurs, placed by the government at many gatherings and protests to try to incite the crowds into violence, Civic Forum successfully maintained its nonviolent discipline at every turn.<sup>88</sup>

#### **Principles of Conception:**

**Assess events and options in light of levels of strategic decision making.**<sup>89</sup> Partial conformity. At the level of policy, Civic Forum did an excellent job in quickly organizing and formulating their modest objectives. The movement's strategy also proved sound in that they effectively acted in the context of their opponent's actions. The response to the violence

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<sup>84</sup> Havel, "The Power of the Powerless."

<sup>85</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 204-205.

<sup>86</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 28.

<sup>87</sup> Glenn, *Framing Democracy*, 143-145.

<sup>88</sup> Glenn, *Framing Democracy*, 133.

<sup>89</sup> The levels of strategic decision-making refers to the five levels of strategic thought identified as critical to successful nonviolent revolution as laid out by Ackerman and Kruegler. These levels are, from broadest to narrowest, policy, operational planning, strategy, tactics, and logistics.

against demonstrators on International Students' Day was quick and effectively framed in the context of their opponents' immoral actions.<sup>90</sup>

Historically it is easy to look back at the events leading up to the Velvet Revolution and see that the regime was doomed well before International Students' Day in 1989. However, according to most first-hand accounts of the revolution, it was highly surprising and unexpected at the time.<sup>91</sup> Because of the perceived spontaneity and therefore lack of time, Civic Forum failed to assess the situation operationally, tactically, or logistically.

**Adjust offensive and defensive operations on the basis of opponent's vulnerability.**

Conformity. Around the time of the inception of Charter 77, Havel said in a later conversation with Adam Michnik, "I increasingly felt that sooner or later something would crack; that it couldn't go on like that forever, because one could notice an even bigger pressure on this shell. And it was clear that an accidental event could provoke huge changes."<sup>92</sup> The reported murder of one student on November 17, 1989 proved to be just the event he was looking for. Dissident leadership recognized that the attack against the students on that day was not an affirmation of government power, but an act of desperation to maintain it. Identifying the government's vulnerability at the time, dissident forces formed Civic Forum and consolidated the striking students and theaters.<sup>93</sup>

Initially, the government was dismissive of these civic fora and refused to meet with Havel to negotiate.<sup>94</sup> On November 21, the Czechoslovak prime minister announced that while force would no longer be used against demonstrators, he would "protect socialism, about

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<sup>90</sup> Glenn, *Framing Democracy*, 132-133, 143-145.

<sup>91</sup> Havel's lecture at Columbia.

<sup>92</sup> Matynia, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 257.

<sup>93</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 202-204.

<sup>94</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 193.

which no discussion is possible.”<sup>95</sup> So, days of normal protests and demonstrations continued until the day of the general strike, November 27. Upon the successful mobilization of a majority of the population, Civic Forum recognized that the government no longer had any power and began to press for greater reform, including the abolition of one-party rule and a call for free elections.<sup>96</sup> At every moment the government displayed its weakness, Civic Forum acted swiftly and forcefully to make strategic and political gains.

**Sustain conformity between sanctions, mechanisms,<sup>97</sup> and objectives.** Conformity. Civic Forum, under the leadership of Havel, pursued their objectives by attempting to coerce and convert government officials. By employing various sanctions of public dissent, nonviolent protest, and strikes in particular, Civic Forum was successful in coercing the government into open discussions for reform.<sup>98</sup> Once these discussions began taking place, Civic Forum successfully converted many Communist officials as evidenced both by those who willfully conceded power and by the Communist Party members who remained in office under the government of national understanding.<sup>99</sup>

**IV. Conclusion.** Three major lessons can be taken from the huge success of the Velvet Revolution. First of these is the importance of seeking cooperation rather than contention with opponents. In the case of Civic Forum, painstaking efforts were made not to humiliate the regime. Always they emphasized their desire to communicate with the government and negotiate with them. Even during the general strike the efforts to maintain order by limiting the

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<sup>95</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 194.

<sup>96</sup> Ritter, *COSMOS*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> These mechanisms are specific mechanisms of change identified by the renowned nonviolent theorist Gene Sharp and reiterated in *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*. These are conversion, accommodation, coercion, and disintegration.

<sup>98</sup> Glenn, *Social Forces*, 194.

<sup>99</sup> Calda, *Roundtable Talks*, 164-165.

professions involved as well as the duration created a mood of friendly good-will rather than outrage and opposition. Had Civic Forum taken a more confrontational approach the transition of power likely would have encountered far more resistance.

Second, related to the first lesson, is the importance of establishing not only clear, but definitively attainable objectives. The first demands made by Civic Forum were notable for their timidity, particularly when contrasted with the rapid changes occurring throughout the rest of the Eastern bloc. Not only did this contribute to the non-contentious approach of the movement, but it also left room to continue negotiations and make further demands as the weeks went on, eventually leading to the formation of a new government. Movements need not set out with the goal of a government overthrow; modest objectives often serve as stepping stone to greater and broader change.

Finally, the Velvet Revolution illustrates the necessity of organizational strength. Had Civic Forum not been able to consolidate the already striking, yet disjointed groups of the population, they would never have been treated with legitimacy by the government. Negotiations therefore never would have taken place and institutional change never achieved. Additionally, without the successful organization within Civic Forum, clear objectives probably never would have taken shape. The organization of Prague students within Civic Forum to coordinate the general strike also would not have occurred and the revolution would have been without its crowning achievement and clearest demonstration of power.

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