

Ideological Orientation and Political Views and Standpoints of Representatives of Czech Underground Culture, 1969-1989 (Underground and Dissidence – Allies or Enemies?)

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THE political, ideological orientation of Czech or Slovak representatives of the underground movement that existed in the country during the decades of totalitarian system can be adequately interpreted only within the framework of the political ideas of the entirety of Central and East European dissidence. As there have already been published many works written by eminent British, Canadian or American historians (some of whom will be quoted later on) who dealt with these and related topics, let me only remind you of some of the obvious implications that seem to be relevant to us.

When looking back at the dissident movements that existed behind the Iron Curtain in the 1970s and 1980s, or even earlier, we cannot ignore:

a) The rich ideological variety that existed within each East European dissident group despite the fact that each of them were labelled by the Communist Party bosses and their henchmen as “hopeless efforts by isolated individuals in the pay of Western imperialists”, as “anti-Soviet activity”, “anti-socialist”, “anti-working class plots” on the one hand – and on the other, in the West, as “democratic”, “anti-totalitarian”, “freedom-loving” movements – regardless of their actual aims and ambitions.

b) The fact, that in each Central and East European country in which a dissident movement existed at least in its embryonic phase, the political and ideological ambitions of such movement were largely subject to the politi-

cal and social structure that existed in each of the respective countries before the establishment of the communist regime. Such revivals of local traditions in some cases rather contradicted what the West supposed were the freedom-loving, pro-democratic character of all dissident, anti-communist movements. Moreover, some of them were headed by the ex-Communist Party proponents and apparatchiks, which often lead to misunderstanding and bitterness on the side of more naïve western supporters of these movements.

c) The weak democracies in Central European countries, including today’s Czech Republic and the truly pseudo-democratic system in today’s, Russia can be perceived as sad evidence of such historic developments.

Just a few examples: the complete lack of any experience with a pluralistic, democratic system in pre-revolutionary Russia enabled not only the smooth establishment of Stalinism with all its consequences, but also the ideological orientation of a number of its opponents: The Russian (or Soviet) dissidence comprised anti-Semitic, racist, chauvinistic tendencies, often idealizing the heritage of Russian Orthodox church, sometimes even denouncing “the rotten West” with the same vehemence as the Communist Party propaganda – suffice to recall Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn!

The dissident movement in Poland faced similar problems resulting from the country’s pre-war political regime: the strong nationalistic, anti-Russian, anti-German, anti-Semitic,

religious, Roman Catholic tradition often contradicted the ambitions of true democrats among Polish dissidents.

In Slovakia, there were attempts among the few local dissidents to glorify the Clerical Fascist regime that existed in the country during WWII.

The GDR dissidents, as far as their ideological orientation was concerned, were mostly subject to the political development in West Germany, or at least they had to put up with it, a fact that more or less guaranteed their democratic orientation. Nevertheless, there also existed another social undercurrent in the GDR, which resulted in a massive neo-Nazi movement in “neue Bundesländer” after German reunification.

Seen in such a context, the Czech Lands, i.e. the Czech-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, with its relatively strong pre-war democratic, pluralistic tradition, was rather exceptional in the history of the dissident movement behind the Iron Curtain: the Charter 77 movement being perhaps the best example of such heritage. It is a well-known fact that Charter 77 united a large number of Czech and Slovak dissidents of the most varied denomination and of very different political backgrounds and affiliations, starting with former Communist Party members such as Ludvík Vaculík, Jiří Dienstbier or Pavel Kohout, or even apparatchiks such as Jiří Hájek, Jaroslav Šabata or Zdeněk Mlynář, through non-communists or democrats of Masaryk's persuasion (e.g. Jan Patočka, Václav Černý, Václav Havel), via genuine anti-communists (e.g. Karel Pecka and most of the former political prisoners of the 1950s), to Catholic priests (e.g. Josef Zvěřina) and even to some non-communist leftists (e.g. Petr Uhl or Jiří Müller) – but definitely no persons burdened with racist or fascist heritage.

Perhaps only such a rich variety of Czech and Slovak dissidents, who came to be united by their aversion and resistance to this totalitarian, fundamentally anti-pluralistic, anti-

democratic, and, as a matter of fact, anti-socialist regime could be ready to incorporate the Czech underground community and its culture.

Since quite a lot of attention from the side of historians has already been given:

a) to the variety of cultural activities of the Czech underground community existing within the given delimitation, i.e. activities developing in the field of literature, music, arts, samizdat book production, journalism and so on;

b) to the dominant ideas, main political views and standpoints of the best known representatives of Czechoslovak dissidence within the given period, especially to the most important and influential part of it, as it was represented by the Charter 77 movement, we would like to concentrate our attention on less well-known ideas, views and standpoints of “spiritual leaders” of Czech underground culture, which cannot by any means be identified with the views prevailing in the Charter 77 movement because at the very least the underground movement preceded the foundation of Charter 77 by several years.

Now, within the scope of Czech underground culture there occurs an issue of primary importance, that has to be answered first of all: What was really meant by the notion of “underground” by those who coined it? Because if the concept “underground” were only to serve as a label for a certain style of music or certain orientation in the arts and literature we would hardly have any matter to discuss. However, the English term “underground” as it was being used in Czech culture undoubtedly referred to a specific world view, a specific orientation in life; it was to denote a specific system of values, all of which can be adequately interpreted and evaluated only within a concrete social and political framework.

What is mostly understood by the notion of “underground culture” in Czechoslovakia within the two decades between 1969-1989 follows from the characteristics, or if you like

a delimitation, given by Ivan Martin Jirous, one of the leading figures of the Czech underground movement, in his manifesto *Zpráva o třetím českém hudebním obrození* [Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival], written and published in samizdat in 1975¹. The English term of the so called “underground” can only be applied to a certain part of independent, anti-totalitarian, unofficial cultural activities, i.e. those that can be traced and identified in the community that had gradually gathered around the rock group The Plastic People of the Universe during the first half of the 1970s and which went on to be surprisingly productive until the end of the 1980s. Looking more closely at I.M. Jirous’s *Report*, his “manifesto” of 1975, we can identify a survey of some previous ideas and views that the author found instrumental for the formulation of his own ideas with the help of which he managed to express the leading principles of the Czech underground movement. Thus, we should first discuss the ideas of Jirous’ “underground forerunners” on the one hand, and those parts of the ideological background of the given era that generated such ideas and subsequently led to the main principles of Czech underground culture on the other hand.

It is undeniable that it was the entirety of the “cultural revolution” of the 1960s of which the Beat generation in the U.S., or the post-war French or German Existentialists were only early signals, that in its most radical modifications led to a certain kind of re-evaluation of traditional Western values. It was not just the 1960s in the West, but partially in what was then “the East”, too, that saw massive changes in the established system of values. Let me only remind you of the immense role of the innovations in aesthetics and in the whole of the life-style as started by rock’n’roll music, the

Beatles, the hippies, the “flower power”, the drug culture, that later generated more self-conscious anti-war movements, the so-called “sexual revolution”, various anti-establishment movements, the ideas of cultural “autonomy”, early environmentalist and ecological movements, left-wing, anarchistically oriented university disruptions, Abbie Hoffman’s and Jerry Rubin’s Yippies and so on – as far as the ideas of cultural “underground”. And all of them could be understood as attempts at creating independent, “autonomous”, non-alienated social “substructures”.

Indeed, the 1960s represented a fantastic cultural and ideological ferment the importance of which was later on deliberately blurred by the world of show-business and fashion, although it is also a well-known fact that not all the ideas generated by the 1960s were necessarily those of an anti-dogmatic, anti-indoctrination character. Nevertheless the vague, but certainly not politically indoctrinated, brotherhood and sisterhood of long-haired hippies for the most part proved to be quite influential in promoting tolerance and re-evaluating values, in its effort to defy the political and cultural establishment of the day. And it was exactly such spontaneous ideas that formed the cultural background when the Czech underground movement began to take shape.

Therefore, if we were to trace the most important sources of ideas that gave the decisive impetus to the Czech underground movement, instead of studying various theories of the so-called “counter-culture” we had better look for the ideas rendered e.g. in lyrics and music by Lou Reed, Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg, or David Peel. Almost the entire world of Czech underground was predicated on songs such as *I’m Beginning to See the Light* by the Velvet Underground, *Everybody’s Smoking Marijuana* by David Peel, or *Nothing* or *How Sweet I Roamed from Field to Field* by the Fugs. Had it not been such a spontaneous movement lacking any concrete political programme, the Czech un-

¹ The text was first published in English in *The Merry Ghetto*, a catalogue added to the record *The Plastic People... Prague. Egon Bondy’s Happy Hearts Club Banned*, London-Paris 1978; most recently in *Views from the Inside. Czech Underground Literature and Culture (1948-1989)*, Prague 2006.

derground movement, like other movements both in the West and in the East, would have never built on its strength and endurance and could never have become so varied.

However, as is usual in all social and cultural movements, even the so-called underground communities generated theoreticians who attempted to formulate the “guidelines” for such movements. I.M. Jirous in his above-mentioned *Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival* mentions e.g. some of Jeff Nuttall’s ideas in the book *Bomb Culture* (1968)², then, of course, he quotes the well-known, though somewhat enigmatic words by Marcel Duchamp about how “the great artist of tomorrow will go underground”, and he also paraphrases some statements by Ralf-Rainer Rygulla whom he mentions directly in one of his articles written as early as 1969³. Yet one more important source of ideas that might have inspired him to formulate some of his own thoughts about the underground culture was the book *Do It!* by Jerry Rubin (1970)⁴. It is known from other sources that Jirous was acquainted with Rubin’s book as early as the beginning of the 1970s. Since it is especially Duchamp and Rygulla whose ideas seem to be most influential, I should like to remind you of the parts of their texts quoted or paraphrased by Jirous, also because they no longer seem to be very well known nowadays.

Marcel Duchamp himself recalls the moment when he uttered his famous statement in Philadelphia in 1961 in a conversation with Jean Neyens, which took place only four years later, i.e. in 1965, and in which he said:

[...] on m’avait demandé “Où allons-nous?”. Moi j’ai simplement dit : “Le grand bonhomme de demain se cachera. Ira sous terre”. En anglais c’est mieux qu’en français : “Will go underground”. Il faudra qu’il meure avant d’être connu [...]”⁵.

² J. Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, New York 1968.

³ I.M. Jirous, “The Primitives Group – česká tvář undergroundu”, *Sešity pro literaturu a diskusi*, 1969, 39, pp. 49-50; see also Idem, *Magorův zápisník*, Praha 1997, pp. 692-696.

⁴ J. Rubin, *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution*, New York 1970.

⁵ See <http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/inter-views/md_jean/md_jean.html>

Duchamp’s idea actually emphasizes the necessity for artists, providing they really want to remain actual artists, to be unknown, to escape the attention of the world of commerce, of a market economy, but his idea perfectly corresponds with one of the principal concerns of the Czech underground community that had to try to escape the attention of other “devils” in the 1970s.

As far as Ralf-Rainer Rygulla is concerned, the passage that roused Jirous’ interest is found in his epilogue written for an anthology of an Anglo-German collection of underground poetry published first in Darmstadt in 1968 under the title *Fuck You! Underground Gedichte*⁶. There he says among other things:

Der von Ed Sanders geforderte “totale Angriff auf die Kultur” kann nicht durch systemimmanente Kritik erfolgen, sondern durch Kritik von außen, d.h. von Kriminellen, Süchtigen und Farbigen [...] Die Leute vom Underground haben erkannt, daß innerhalb der Legalität nichts mehr verändert kann.

Jirous’ concept of the so-called “second culture” was undoubtedly strongly influenced by some of Rygulla’s ideas.

Now, as far as Jirous’ *Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival* is concerned a few preliminary remarks seem to be necessary: Jirous wrote the text in February 1975, i.e. at a moment when the Czech underground movement was in full swing, so to say. Therefore, being one of the “fathers” of the entire movement, he probably felt obliged not only to offer a kind of the “theoretical defence” of the movement, but also to describe it in terms comprehensible to other formations or groupings of Czechoslovak dissidence, a fact which actually made out of his *Report* one of the first attempts at opening a dialogue within the whole of the Czechoslovak “unofficial world”. Jirous’ *Report* thus mostly contains a description of the variety of the underground community’s artistic activities, and the “ideological aspects” are only included as an addendum: undoubtedly due to the fact

⁶ *Fuck You! Underground Gedichte*, ed. R.-R. Rygulla, Darmstadt 1968; Frankfurt/M. 1980.

that they did not play a very important role. Nevertheless, they are found there and can be summed up in the following quotation⁷:

I have often used the term “underground” and twice the term “second culture”. In conclusion, we should make clear what this is. In Bohemia, the underground is not tied to a definite artistic tendency or style, though in music, for example, it is expressed largely through rock music. The underground is a mental attitude of intellectuals and artists who consciously and critically determine their own stance towards the world in which they live. It is the declaration of a struggle against the establishment, the regime. It is a movement that works chiefly through the various art forms but whose representatives are aware that art is not and ought not to be the final aim of an artist’s efforts. The underground is created by people who have understood that within the bounds of legality nothing can be changed, and who no longer even attempt to function within those bounds. Ed Sanders of the Fugs put it very clearly when he declared a total “attack on culture”.

This attack can be carried out only by people who stand outside that culture. [...] Two absolutely necessary characteristics of those who have chosen the underground as their spiritual home are rage and humility. Anyone lacking these qualities will not be able to live in the underground. It is a sad and frequent phenomenon in the West, where, in the early 1960s, the idea of the underground was theoretically formulated and established as a movement, that some of those who gained recognition and fame in the underground came into contact with official culture (for our purposes, we call it the first culture), which enthusiastically accepted them and swallowed them up as it accepts and swallows up new cars, new fashions or anything else. In Bohemia, the situation is essentially different, and far better than in the West, because we live in an atmosphere of absolute agreement: the first culture doesn’t want us and we don’t want anything to do with the first culture. This eliminates a temptation that for everyone, even the strongest artist, is the seed of destruction: the desire for recognition, success, the winning of prizes and titles and last but not least, the material security which follows.

In the West many people who, because of their mentality, would perhaps belong among our friends, live in confusion. Here the lines of demarcation have been drawn clearly once and for all. Nothing that we do can possibly please the representatives of official culture because it cannot be used to create the impression that everything is in order. For things are not in order.[...] The aim of the underground here in Bohemia is the creation of a second culture: a culture that will not be dependent on official channels of communication, social recognition, and the hierarchy of values laid down by the establishment; a culture which cannot have the destruction of the establishment as its aim because in doing so, it would drive itself into the establishment’s embrace [...]

As Jirous is quite explicit in his characteristic of what he calls “underground” and “second culture” not much comment on the quoted

passage seems necessary. It is obvious that Jirous was trying to compose a kind of “underground apology” by employing the theoretical arsenal of some of his predecessors. His concept of the “second culture” seems to be influenced by Rygulla’s postulate: in its stress upon the necessity of its becoming absolutely independent of the so-called “first”, i.e. the established culture, a fact which met with criticism on the side of some Czechoslovak dissidents, but even on the side of some of his underground colleagues. Also his preference for the “situation in Bohemia”, i.e. in Czechoslovakia, must have raised a few eyebrows, to say nothing of his “millenarian”, “chiliastic” vision of the future of the country (“lines of demarcation drawn once and for all”).

However, the political and cultural situation in the mid 1970s in Czechoslovakia seemed so hopeless that Jirous’ radical standpoints were welcomed by many of his friends as legitimate and justifiable. One of the natural consequences of such radicalism was of course the impossibility of opening any dialogue with the representatives of the “first culture”, to say nothing of the “representatives of power”. On the other hand, it became apparent that there was a danger of the underground community getting close to some religious sectarians living in seclusion from the majority of society.

Jirous’ radical, almost extremist ideas were close to the poet and philosopher Egon Bondy, who next to Jirous is probably the most influential of all Czech underground writers. Moreover, he was active in producing theories and hypotheses. Bondy’s case was unique and is relatively well-known today since dozens of his books have already been published in Czech, some of them also in translations into foreign languages⁸. Having published all his poetry

⁷ See *Views from the Inside*, op. cit., p. 30-31.

⁸ In English, see e.g. *The Merry Ghetto*, op. cit.; “Cellar Work” [an excerpt from a novella + selected poem], *Yazyk Magazine*, 1992, 1; “Berta. Part Three. Section XXII” [an excerpt from a novella], *Ibidem*, 1995, 4; *The Plastic People of the Universe*, Praha 1999; *The Consolation of Ontology. On the Substantial and Nonsubstantial Models*, Lanham- Boulder-New York-Oxford, 2001.

and most of his philosophy since the late 1940s only in samizdat and having always declared himself a radical Marxist of an anti-Soviet line, i.e. first as a Trotskyite, later on as a Maoist, Bondy was an extremely rare bird in the world of Czechoslovak dissidence. His opposition to any kind of political establishment, his Utopian interpretation of radical leftist trends brought him to the underground community as early as the beginning of the 1970s – and he soon became a kind of a “living legend”.

His provocative “anti-poetic”, “total realistic” poems were set to music by The Plastic People, and his dystopian novel *Invalidní sourozenci* [The Handicapped Siblings]⁹, written in 1974, became a sort of a “holy scripture” for the Czech underground community of the 1970s. In the novel, Bondy presents his vision of a distant future, where there would be no more bonds and communication between the majority society and the minority society of underground people who would have managed to establish a community absolutely independent of a future version of the “first culture” of consumers and warmongers. In the situation of the country’s isolation during the 1970s, Bondy’s fiction exerted a powerful influence on the underground community with its prophetic, visionary aspects. No wonder Bondy was one of those figures of the underground community who could not cope with the “minimalist”, law-obeying principles of Charter 77 and became one of its critics and even denounced the alleged “shadow establishment” of Charter 77 in the later years and was ready to offer his own, somewhat confused ideas of what we could call “undergroundism” by which he tried to renounce and denounce everything but the underground culture itself¹⁰. Nevertheless,

even with such ideas, rather than with his own version of political radicalism of a Maoist orientation, Bondy did represent a part of the Czech underground community in its political or social ambitions, although it must be noted he became largely popular not because of these, but because of his excellent poetry, his sense of humour and self-irony otherwise so rare in thinkers of his kin. On the other hand, for a part of the more conservative figures of Czechoslovak dissidence, Bondy represented the very incarnation of the dreaded underground community with which the “decent dissidents” should have nothing in common.

However, it would be one-sided if Bondy’s and Jirous’ views were to be presented as only aimed at an apology of a kind of “splendid isolation” of the underground community, thus indeed echoing, recalling some kind of millenarian sectarians. In a number of his poems, even essays and treatises, Bondy provocatively and directly calls for an immediate overthrow of the totalitarian regime, of “Soviet Fascism” – and not only in Czechoslovakia or in the Soviet block, but everywhere in the world: he demands the immediate initiation of what used to be called “world revolution” and the establishment of real, “direct” democracy in the name of the salvation of all humanity, renouncing all versions of “class society” and “exploitation of human labour”.

For example, in his text titled *Tzv. “Březnová báseň 1971”, čtená na veřejném shromáždění* [The So-Called “March Poem 1971” – Read at a Public Gathering, 1971]¹¹ he says among other

in the underground samizdat magazine *Vokno*, and was especially explicit about it in his novel *Bezejmenná* [Nameless 1986]; first published in samizdat in the same year, first published by regular printing presses only in 2001 (E. Bondy, *Bezejmenná*, Brno-Praha 2001): here his self-appointed defence or apology of “underground autonomy” and his criticism were mostly addressed to the supposed “shadow establishment” of Charter 77. On the other hand, his apology met with negative reactions from some underground essayists and reviewers themselves – e.g. Ivan Lamper or Alexandr Vondra working mostly for another underground magazine *Revolver Revue*.

¹¹ See the Czech original in *Básnické dílo Egon Bondyho VII. – Básnické sbírky z let 1971-1974*, Praha 1992, pp. 40-43; see also Egon Bondy, *Ve všední den i v neděli... Výbor z básnick-*

⁹ The novel was first published in Czech by the Toronto-based Czech publishing house Sixty-Eight Publishers (1981); more recently by the publishing house “Zvláštní vydání...”, Brno 2002. It was translated into Italian as *Fratelli invalidi*, Milano 1993; into German as *Die Invaliden Geschwister*, Heidelberg 1999; parts of it were also translated into Polish and Hungarian.

¹⁰ Bondy did so in the 1980s in some articles that he published

things:

When I was twenty they executed Závěš Kalandra / who was then more to me than my own father / A few years later they nearly executed me / and now Petr Uhl and thirteen other comrades / have been convicted and are on their way to Jáchymov / again only because they are Marxists all of them / my comrades who with me / unmask the state-capitalist system – that creature of the Soviet Union – / and the colony that's called our own country / only because they are Marxists / and point the finger at the base alliance of international state capitalists / and our total enslavement [...] True – it is clearly impossible to start fighting with your bare hands and right out of nowhere / but whoever remains a human being / must be ready from this day and this hour / because the state-capitalist regime has to be destroyed / only don't ever again allow yourselves to be pushed around by professional apparatchiks – like in 1968 – / by those Svobodas, Dubčeks and Černíks / who (why should they?) don't really want to change a regime which created them – a regime they live off / You must always be aware that socialism / is no more and no less / than society organized for self-government / and so all powers are in your hands / if you will only use them / And take to heart at this moment / the words of Mao Tse Tung / that liberation cannot come from above / people can only liberate themselves – and from below / while from above they gain nothing but the yoke [...] You sixty-year-olds – drag yourselves straight to the crematoria and take your place in the line / you forty-year-olds – may you watch your genitals rot away just like the genitals of your wives and nauseating lovers / you twenty-year-olds – go and hang yourselves right away / if you won't start preparing yourselves this very day and every day for war war war / war and war against the criminals / who otherwise will screw you any way they choose [...].

Looking back at such revolutionary proclamations we can hardly decide if their author really meant them or if he wrote them as a kind of a “reminder” of a “historic task of humankind” that would inevitably have to be accomplished one day in the future. One way or another, there is no doubt Bondy's voice was “crying in the wilderness” in Czechoslovak dissidence of the 1970s and 1980s and met with little understanding even from his underground fans and readers. Together with his later ideas of “undergroundism”, as we have called them for our purpose, they were considered to be interesting, perhaps even inspiring – though mostly in the metaphoric sense of the word. Sometimes they were even mocked and parodied.

Nevertheless, even I.M. Jirous, although always remaining by Catholic faith, exhibited

some understanding for Bondy's extremist political radicalism, thus contradicting somewhat to his own postulates of creating an independent “second culture”. He used the following quotation from Mao Tse-Tung as the motto of his *Report* of 1975:

In the great cultural revolutions there is only one way for the people – to free themselves by their own efforts. Nothing must be used that would do it for them. Believe in people, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast away fear! Don't be afraid of commotion. Let people educate themselves in the great revolutionary movement.

Moreover, in the final passage of his *Report*, some parts of which have already been quoted, Jirous writes:

Briefly put, the underground is the activity of artists and intellectuals whose work is unacceptable to the establishment and who, in this state of unacceptability, do not remain passive, but attempt through their work and attitudes to destroy the establishment.

On the whole we could probably agree with statements by I.M. Jirous, Milan Hlavsa, Vratislav Brabenec and by several other representatives of the Czech underground community on several occasions after 1989¹² – they argued that the Czech underground really had no political platform and no political programme. They really only wanted to do “their own thing” – play music for their limited audience, publish their texts in samizdat editions, and enjoy their own way of life. Unfortunately, however, they were compelled to become politically radicalised because of the totalitarian regime's intolerance and brutal oppression. However, their radicalism did not lead to a kind of a “world revolution” but rather to the activities of the defenders of human rights in Charter 77.

Jirous' and Bondy's ideological and political radicalism also found a necessary counterweight in Christian ideas (or perhaps their radicalism was channelled by them). They were rendered by other writers of the underground community, especially the protestant priest Svatopluk Karásek and his ex classmate,

ého díla 1950-1994, Praha 2009, pp. 180-183; see the English translation in *Yazzyk Magazine*, 1992, 1, pp. 20-23.

¹² See e.g. the documentary film *The Plastic People of the Universe*; dir. Jana Chytilová, Czech Television (ČT) and Video 57, Prague 2001.

the musician and composer Vratislav Brabenec. Karásek used to address the underground community with his gospel songs, actually Biblical parables and similes set to music, making their eternal messages comprehensible, easy to grasp, for everyone living his or her life in the underground “ghetto”. It may be sufficient to quote only a few names of Karásek’s songs to get some idea of their “ideological influence”: *Řekni ďáblovi ne* [Say no to the Devil, 1974], *Podobenství o zrně a kůkolu* [The Parable of the Good Seed and the Tares, 1977], *Vý silní ve víře* [You Who Are Strong in the Faith, 1970], *Kázání o zkáze Sodomy a Gomory* [The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, 1975]. The closing four verses of the last song are explicit enough: “God did not find those ten just men he sought; / With fire and brimstone his destruction wrought. // In our town too those ten just men God seeks; / If he can’t find them, then we’re up shit creek”¹³.

These and similar words of the Bible helped the underground audience, despite the fact that it mostly consisted of non-Christians, i.e. “agnostics”, to identify their social position and to formulate their relation towards the majority society and the political establishment. Moreover, they proved to be instrumental for their worldview, and even helped them find their way to their own spiritual values and understand the so-called transcendental notions.

It could be said that the Czech underground community, when confronted with brutal mechanisms of totalitarian oppression, started to identify its position in society with the early Christian gatherings of “the persecuted” – no matter if the individual persons were official adherents of the Catholic or Protestant churches or not. Surprisingly enough the Czech heirs of the rebels of the 1960s, who in their defiance of any social establishment were mostly of an anti-religious orientation (it is enough to recall John Lennon’s

words about the fading popularity of Jesus Christ, to say nothing about the standpoints of people such as Mick Jagger or Frank Zappa) found their way not only to Christianity, but even to legal Christian churches. Thanks to Svatopluk Karásek and Vratislav Brabenec, the author of a very popular performance by the Plastic People entitled *Pašijové hry velikonoční* [Passion Play, performed and recorded secretly in 1978]¹⁴ which once again rendered the most famous story in the Western world very much topical, the denizens of the underground were reminded not only of the centuries-long tradition of the sui generis “underground existence” of Czech Protestants – the so called Bohemian Brethren, whose church was banned between the 17th – 19th centuries, but also of genuine and original Christian values and even found its way to the Catholic Church, which lost its dominant position in Czechoslovak society as early as 1918, and was completely rid of its former power after 1948 and after centuries became oppressed again: this must have roused the sympathy or even the feelings of self-identification from the Czech underground community. Such a revival of Christianity in the underground community also led the underground to the platform of Charter 77 in which mutual tolerance was one of its leading principles, and Christian ideas were largely accepted.

Before we discuss the relationship of the underground community to the broader community of Charter 77, we should look at yet one more attempt at formulating a scholarly “theory” of the underground, in fact the only one that followed after Jirous’ *Report* and preceded Bondy’s self-appointed apologetics of the 1980s. We have in mind Jiří Němec’s essay *Nové šance svobody* [New Chances of Freedom, 1979]¹⁵. Němec, himself a philosopher,

¹⁴ See the English translation in *The Plastic People of the Universe*, Praha 1999, pp. 87-97; the original record of the music has been released as a CD several times. See Discography in *Views from the Inside*, op. cit.

¹⁵ The essay was published only in samizdat in Czechoslovakia (see Vokno, 1979, 2) and on the pages of Czech exile journals,

¹³ English translations of the texts of most of Karásek’s songs are found in a catalogue added to the record *Svatopluk Karásek: Say No to the Devil*, Upsala 1979.

one of the best educated persons of his generation, could make use of his own experience: he was both one of the leading figures of the underground movement from its beginnings, and one of the “founders” of Charter 77.

Moreover, he was one of the few Czech intellectuals who managed to gain the support of prominent Czech dissidents for I.M. Jirous and the underground musicians in 1976 when they were jailed and later sentenced to prison for allegedly “disturbing the peace”. And it is also well known, that the support of Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík, Zdeněk Mlynář, Jan Patočka, Jaroslav Seifert and a number of other dissidents who only a few months later established Charter 77 brought many underground people into the Charter community¹⁶. Feeling responsible for such “incorporation” of the underground community into the community of Charter 77, Němec tried to uproot the prejudices of the supposed “intolerance” of the Czech underground and also pointed out how different its attitudes were from the “disengagement” of the hippies of the 1960s on the one hand, and how surprisingly close they were to Christianity on the other. Because, of course, it was obvious that not all Charter 77 intellectuals, especially ex-communists, jumped with joy having realized they found themselves in one group with the underground “filthy rockers” or even supposed drug-addicts!

As far as Charter 77 and the position of the underground community within it and outside it is concerned, I do not think it is necessary to give a detailed description of its membership and leading principles. Books in both Czech and English have supplied us with such relevant information. Let me only remind you

e.g. in Svědectví (Paris), 1980, 62, pp. 221-229; it was translated into Swedish and French; see also “Bibliografie Jiřího Němce”, *Kritický sborník*, 1999, 4, pp. 63-94, esp. p. 70.

¹⁶ About the development in the relations between the underground community and Charter 77 movement see e.g. M. Machovec, “Charta a underground”, *Charta 77. Od obhajoby lidských práv k demokratické revoluci 1977-1989. Sborník z konference k 30. výročí Charty 77*, eds. M. Devátá, J. Suk, Praha 2007, pp. 195-215.

of works by Hubert Gordon Skilling¹⁷, Vilém Prečan¹⁸, Aviezer Tucker¹⁹ and Barbara J. Falk²⁰ since they helped western readers most of all to understand the principal ideas of Central and Eastern European dissidence.

The platform that unified the rich variety of Charter 77 membership as it was outlined in the beginning of this paper is well-known, as well. Inspired by the fact that representatives of the Czechoslovak government had signed the Helsinki Agreement of 1975, they decided to urge the government merely to adhere to the laws that already existed in Czechoslovak legislation. We may term this approach a legalistic one. It was the guiding principle of Charter 77 even though it was apparent from the very beginning that its application was dubious: to ask a government that had established its power in violation of laws, some of whose members could even be charged with high treason, should strike one at the very least as imprudent. Yet one more contradiction is easily to be discovered between what could be said and published in Charter 77 documents (e.g. in petitions demanding a dialogue with representatives of power, in Havel’s programme of the so-called “nonpolitical politics”) and the real, actual, true aims of Charter 77. No doubt Charter 77’s leaders knew they would be treated as the political opposition in the country even though they would deny and renounce such ambition. Indeed, they were thus treated, and in the long run they indeed established a germ of real political opposition without which they

¹⁷ G.H. Skilling, *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*, London 1981; Idem, *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, London 1989.

¹⁸ *Human Rights in Czechoslovakia: A Documentation*, ed. V. Prečan, Paris 1983; Idem, *Independent Literature and Samizdat in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and the 1980s*, Praha 1992; Idem, “The Re-emergence of a civil society. Independent currents in communist Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980”, *De tsjechische Republiek en de Europese cultuur*. Brussels 2000, pp. 57-66.

¹⁹ A. Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, Pittsburgh, PA 2000.

²⁰ B.J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings*, New York-Budapest 2003.

could hardly have attempted to overthrow the totalitarian regime in 1989.

It is a less-well known fact, however, that there were many Charter 77 sympathizers or fellow-travellers who never signed the Charter, and yet were in favour of it, and, moreover, worked for it, even when the reasons for their not becoming Charter 77 signatories could be different: some of these political “apostates” definitely wanted to remain less conspicuous and not lose a chance for efficient work useful for the entirety of the dissidence (e.g. Jiřina Šiklová, Josef Mundil or Milan Šimečka). Therefore it cannot be taken for granted that signing Charter 77 meant that the respective signatory was absolutely in favour of what was being done in the name of Charter 77 on the one hand, and, on the other, that non-signing implied any principal objections to Charter 77 ideas²¹. As far as the underground community of the mentioned rock musicians, poets and artists is concerned, it has been estimated recently that as many as 40 per cent of the overall count of all pre-1989 Charter signatories were in the underground community and belonged, by the way, primarily to the working class²².

Many members of the underground, on the other hand, never signed Charter 77, and thus we can see the Charter 77 community and the underground community as two, partially overlapping circles in a complementary relation. Undoubtedly there were hundreds, if not thousands of underground people who remained outside Charter 77. A brief look at the attitudes to Charter 77 of the most well-known underground figures is illustrative: By the end of the 1970s there were seven stable members in the most famous Czech underground rock band – The Plastic People of the Universe. Out of them three signed Charter 77, whereas four others did not. I.M. Jirous did sign the Charter although its “legalistic” principles were in sharp contrast with the ideas he expressed in his *Re-*

port of 1975 and elsewhere. Egon Bondy signed Charter 77 as well – and did so as early as December 1976, but his signature was immediately nullified by Jiří Němec, a fact which subsequently caused much bitterness²³.

The reasons why people from the underground joined the Charter 77 movement might have been very different. Nevertheless, most of them probably signed it (at least in the first wave in December 1976 and during the following few months) to demonstrate their gratitude to those dissidents who organized support for their friends who were imprisoned in 1976 – and it probably mattered little to them if they disapproved of its “legalistic” aims or not²⁴. After all, it is well-known that “the times they are a’changing”, and what might have seemed impossible and absurd as early as 1975 may have become possible some years later. The “millenarian” or chiliastic radicalism was mostly abandoned in the late 1970s and during the 1980s by the underground. Nevertheless, those who became Charter 77 signatories always formed the most radical fraction within the Charter movement. The apparent contradiction between the original underground ideas as mentioned above, and the “minimalist”, “legalistic”, compromise-seeking programme of Charter 77 proved not to be too drastic, and reconciliation between them was possible. František Stárek, one of the best-known underground journalists and editors, stated it clearly in an interview with the historian Milan Otáhal in 2003²⁵:

I lived in the underground but perceived my signing of Charter 77 as an attitude of a citizen. That was my attitude of a citizen, same as others made their attitudes as citizens clear by entering the Communist Party for instance. Some factory workers might have expressed their attitudes as citizens by being Communist Party members, but I perceived my being a Charter 77 signatory, or being close to the Charter, as my own attitude.

²³ See *Ibidem*.

²⁴ See *Ibidem*.

²⁵ See *Vítězové? poražení? Životopisná interview, I. díl – dissent v období tzv. normalizace*, eds. M. Vaněk, P. Urbášek, Praha 2005, pp. 857-889, esp. p. 882.

²¹ See M. Machovec, “Charta a underground”, op. cit.

²² See *Ibidem*.

Yet in the 1980s there were at least two more important events in the history of Czechoslovak dissidence and Charter 77 on the occasion of which the underground community made its independent political views clear once again:

I) In 1987 the so-called *Dopis 40 signatářů Charty 77 mluvčím* [Letter of Forty Charter 77 Signatories to Charter Spokespersons]²⁶ was issued and caused some indignation on the side of more “conservative” Charter signatories, especially ex-apparatchiks. The *Letter* was initiated by František Stárek, met with a warm welcome by Egon Bondy and was signed mostly by the Charter 77 signatories of “underground origin”. It was a kind of a petition urging the Charter leaders, especially its spokespersons, to lend their ears to the supposed “passive majority” of the signatories who did not want to remain “passive” at all, to give younger Charter 77 signatories more opportunities to shape the movement as a whole, to make the Charter movement more pluralistic. The forty signatories of the *Letter* also supported the idea of summoning the so-called Charter “Forums”, i.e. assemblies of as many Charter signatories as possible at which major issues would be discussed. Fortunately, Václav Havel and other Charter leaders immediately demonstrated understanding for such suggestions. In total four Charter “Forums” were organized before November 1989, and through them the whole of Charter 77 became politically radicalised – almost at the last minute indeed! Charter leaders began accepting invitations to public rallies and demonstrations and began organizing them themselves. In this way, the underground signatories of Charter 77 contributed to the political profile of it and helped make it ready for the big political changes of 1989.

II) In May 1988 Petr Placák, one of the representatives of a younger underground generation whose “press tribune” was mostly

the samizdat magazine called *Revolver Revue* wrote and published in samizdat his *Manifest Českých dětí* [Manifesto of Czech Children]²⁷ which quickly became well-known in the world of Czech dissidence and also roused indignation, even anxiety and misunderstanding. Petr Placák himself never signed Charter 77, but both his father and elder brother did. Furthermore, his father, prof. Bedřich Placák, was among the Charter 77 spokespersons for some time. Even before he published his “manifesto”, Petr Placák gained a reputation in the underground as an excellent poet and writer (his novel *Medorek*, 1985, was awarded the dissident Jiří Orten Prize in 1989). Placák soon made friends with Egon Bondy and I.M. Jirous and for some time even took part in secret rehearsals of The Plastic People as one of the band’s musician and at last in 1988 he came out with a text which actually called for the reestablishment of the old Kingdom of Bohemia, i.e. proclaimed a kind of semi-utopian royalism, a monarchic regime as possibly the best political system. Placák’s poetic vision, partially serious, partially ironic, met with keen interest from the youngest underground generation. Even I.M. Jirous signed the manifesto and in so doing “blessed it” on behalf of the entirety of the underground. On the other hand most Charter 77 leaders were terrified: they were merely too serious and cautious to accept such a child of playfulness and imagination. But as Placák and his followers started organizing various anti-regime demonstrations even the Charter 77 leaders willy-nilly had to accept such an unwelcome ally. In our survey of the political thinking of the Czech underground community Placák’s concept of monarchy is the final and perhaps the most original one. It enriched

²⁷ Placák’s *Manifesto* was published several times in samizdat during 1988-9, for the first time in *Informace o Chartě* (INFOCH), 1988, pp. 17-18, for the second time in Placák’s own samizdat magazine called *Koruna* (1989, 2, pp. 2-3), here, however, both in Czech original and in its Latin translation (!) under the title “Bohemorum liberorum declaratio”. The text of the *Manifesto* was printed for the first time in Paris based Czech exile journal *Svědectví*, 1988, 85, pp. 269-270.

²⁶ See the Czech edition of all Charter 77 documents: *Charta 77: Dokumenty 1977-1989*, I-III, eds. B. Císařovská, V. Prečan, Praha 2007; *Dopis 40 signatářů* see in *Ibidem*, III, pp. 287-290; see also M. Machovec, “Charta a underground”, *op. cit.*

the struggle of Czech dissidents with something they had lacked for a long time: a sense of humour, irony, poetry and very unconventional political (as well as ecological and even egalitarian) ideas. Therefore, I am closing this paper with a quotation from Placák's *Manifesto*:

We Czech children declare that St. Wenceslas' Crown, i.e. the Kingdom of Bohemia, persists!

We are getting ready for the coming of a new King, which is our supreme aim.

The King is Dei gratia, he is responsible to God for his country and for his people!

The King is the aegis for the weak against the ill will of the powerful and the rich!

The King is a guarantee, he protects woods, wild game and the whole nature against the ruling criminals who without any respect pillage and destroy the treasures of the land and the Earth, without giving back to the land what they had robbed from it!

The King is the Law before which people, trees, animals, the land, the woods are equal and any act or conduct of one person at the expense of another is a crime! [...]

The Kingdom is a sacred heritage and the sacred heritage is the highest respect to everything – to every tree, brook, hill, to every single ant in the woods, to people, to their work, to the dignity of every single person!

The Kingdom is not the rule of a minority at the expense of the majority, or the rule of the majority at the expense of a minority!

The Kingdom is not the rule of a few thousand hoarders and money-grubbers, self-appointed ne'er-do-wells and parasites of the land and the nation!

The Kingdom is sacred!

If some of the words found in Placák's *Manifesto* were reminiscent of the ideas expressed by Duchamp, Rygulla, Bondy or Jirous, quoted above, it would probably not be coincidental but symptomatic, and it could serve as indirect evidence of the originality of ideas generated by underground communities that so far have been mostly neglected and ignored.

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