

15 Velvet Revolution to Velvet Divorce

On November 17, 1989, an officially approved demonstration commemorating Jan Opletal and the Nazi destruction of the Czech universities in 1939 was attacked by riot police in a downtown Prague street. The attacks sparked off a wave of protest and demonstration that led to the rapid toppling of the communist government. Truly, it seemed (as contemporary posters stated) that what had taken ten years in Poland, ten months in Hungary, and ten weeks in East Germany had only taken ten days in Czechoslovakia. The collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia did not entirely resemble the negotiated handovers achieved in Poland and Hungary, nor did it result in the mass violence that riveted world attention on Bucharest in December. For its peaceful, even good-humored qualities it was quickly dubbed “The Velvet Revolution.”¹

THE FALL OF COMMUNISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The Velvet Revolution surprised many, not only by its particular characteristics but by the rapidity and drama of the changes. Outside observers—and many Czech and Slovak dissidents—found it hard to believe that the Husák regime or its Jakeš-led epigone would change quickly. Nevertheless, by 1988 there were signs that under the ice things

were finally stirring, as a younger generation that had not directly experienced the 1968 intervention reached maturity. The lip service the Czechoslovak authorities paid to Gorbachev's policies of openness may also have contributed to people's willingness to speak, or even act out.

Signs of the Times

During 1988 more independent initiatives joined Charter 77 and other long-standing dissident groups.² The general public also showed a greater willingness to participate in public expressions of discontent. On the twentieth anniversary of the invasion of 1968, more than 10,000 mostly young people gathered in Prague, shouting support for Gorbachev and greater freedom until dispersed with tear gas. To their surprise, the authorities discovered that hardly any well-known dissidents were involved, evidence that the "social contract" was losing effectiveness. October 28 was declared a public holiday for the first time since 1968, but in spite of the temptation to spend the weekend at their cottages, about 5,000 people met on Wenceslas Square to chant Masaryk's name and call for freedom. On December 10 another demonstration, this time with official permission, marked the fortieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. French President François Mitterrand was visiting Prague, which may explain the official sanction. Nevertheless, the presence of 5,000 demonstrators suggested that Czechoslovakia's party bosses were unsure how to respond to their society while under pressure on human rights from both the Soviet Union and the West.

In 1989 the party evidently decided to show a firmer hand. During January demonstrations on the anniversary of Palach's suicide, the authorities attacked protesters with water cannon and tear gas. They arrested several leading dissidents, including Havel, who was sentenced to nine months in jail. Havel's arrest and sentencing set the stage for the publication of "A Few Sentences," a statement that began circulating at the end of June and by September had 40,000 signatures. "A Few Sentences" called on the regime to honor its words about *perestroika* and democratization, to release all political prisoners, to implement basic human rights, and to reevaluate the events of 1968.³

Events moved dramatically in September when Hungary began to allow East German citizens "vacationing" in Hungary to leave for West Germany. Thousands of East Germans clambered into the West German

embassy in Prague, too. On September 30, Erich Honecker announced that the East Germans in the Prague embassy would be expelled to West Germany. The battered Trabants and scattered windrows of East German marks left by the jubilant “expellees” suggested to many Czechs and Slovaks that their own regime might not be permanent, either. If October 28 seemed quieter in 1989 than in 1988, international events, especially the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 10, countered any resulting pessimism. Many Czechs also took the elevation of the Blessed Agnes to full sainthood by the Polish pope, John Paul II, on November 12 as an omen that change had to come.⁴

The Velvet Revolution

The demonstration that triggered change in Czechoslovakia was co-sponsored by the SSM and an independent students' union the authorities had approved only weeks earlier. The occasion was the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi destruction of Czech universities, celebrated as International Students' Day.⁵ Gathered where Opletal's funeral procession had begun fifty years before, 10,000 to 15,000 youthful demonstrators listened to speakers calling for democratization and Jakeš's dismissal. Then they proceeded to a candle-lighting ceremony at the Slavín cemetery, a shrine of national heroes at Vyšehrad. Several thousand decided to move the demonstration to Wenceslas Square, the traditional site of political protests in Prague. When they found the direct route blocked by riot police, they proceeded along the embankment toward National Avenue (Národní třída), where they turned right past the National Theater. As the crowd, now perhaps as many as 55,000 strong, approached the narrow head of the street, it came face to face with a phalanx of policemen equipped with the helmets, plexiglass shields, and truncheons of the riot squads. After a long standoff, the riot police began systematically beating the 5,000 demonstrators at the head of the procession. Their only exit was past cordons of police and special “Red Beret” anti-terrorist forces, who continued to beat them as they fled.

This brutal end to the student-led demonstration was the catalyst that transformed Czechoslovakia. In response the students called for strikes at the faculties of higher education. On Saturday, November 18, theater students took their strike proclamation to a meeting of the capital's stage actors and directors, who supported them. Thus when the afternoon audiences gathered across Prague, they were treated to read-



Students and riot police face off on National Avenue, November 17, 1989. (ČTK photo)

ings of the students' proclamation and the suspension of performances in sympathy. In many cases, the audience reacted with spontaneous applause and their own complaints. The theater strike rapidly spread to other towns, including Brno and Bratislava, creating a vital link between the students, the actors, and the general public and a source of information when official control of the media was still effective.

The theaters also provided the milieu from which Civic Forum (OF) emerged. Havel, who had returned to Prague from his cottage on November 18, met with other dissidents on the afternoon of November 19, and they decided to create a single opposition organization, Civic Forum. The formal foundation of OF took place that evening in a Prague theater. In its first proclamation, OF declared that it legitimately represented the wishes of the people. It issued specific demands, including Husák's resignation, the removal of the Prague party chief, and an investigation into police action on November 17, and announced its support for a general strike called by the students for two hours on November 27.⁶

Civic Forum was an unknown quantity to most Czechoslovaks for several days after its formation. The communications media, both print

and broadcast, remained under official censorship until after November 19, when the SSM's *Mladá fronta* (Young Front) broke the restrictions. Control over distribution still allowed the party to ensure that only its *Rudé právo* reached the provinces. Czechoslovak television and radio also stayed under party control for several more days. Thus knowledge about OF and its position was difficult to gain. Adding to these difficulties was the perception that OF represented the attitudes of a few dissident intellectuals and the widespread political cynicism and apathy created by the normalized regime.

To counter suspicion, OF insisted that it was not a party, but "simply an open association of those who feel responsible for the positive resolution of the present unbearable political situation, who want to unite the strength of all decent and democratically thinking citizens—artists, students, workers, all people of good-will."⁷ OF's headquarters, in Prague's *Laterna magica* (Magic Lantern) theater, became the revolution's general headquarters and a clearinghouse for uncensored information. In Slovakia on November 20 a group of democratic activists laid the groundwork for OF's Slovak counterpart, Public Against Violence (VPN). In the ensuing days, VPN would come to hold a position in Slovakia analogous to OF's in the Czech lands, and the two established direct contacts on November 21.⁸

Meanwhile, demonstrations continued. Spontaneously, groups of citizens and students met in Wenceslas Square on the afternoon of November 18, and the next day's gatherings there and in Charles Square (*Karlovo náměstí*) were larger and more self-confident. That afternoon several thousand demonstrators set off toward the Castle, but their way was blocked by police. By the afternoon of Monday, November 20, nearly 200,000 demonstrators had gathered at the statue of St. Václav, filling the square and listening as best they could to the speakers who addressed them from the base of the statue. Once again they attempted to march to the Castle, and again they were met by police. As rumors spread the next day that further demonstrations would be broken up with massive force, the student strike coordinating committee issued a proclamation to world governments.⁹

The reaction to the events of November 17 exposed the KSČ's weakness. The SSM pressured Jakeš and Prague party boss Miroslav Štěpán to resign, fearing that the self-organizing students would simply sweep it aside as representative of "youth." It never could overcome its long association with the stagnant normalized party, but in the crucial early

days the SSM provided legitimacy to the unofficial student strike committees, logistical assistance by making typewriters and mimeograph machines available to them, and an establishment ally within the party.¹⁰

The pressure from without also increased. On Tuesday afternoon, November 21, more than 200,000 people in Wenceslas Square listened to Civic Forum speakers from the balcony of the Melantrich building, headquarters of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, whose newspaper *Svobodné slovo* (Free Word) now joined *Mladá fronta* in breaking the censorship. Crowds of similar size continued to gather on succeeding days, to hear speakers from various groups, listen to updates on the talks between the government and OF, and revel in the falling away of habits of caution and fear. Pop star Marta Kubišová's singing of her 1968 hit, a setting of Comenius's words promising the Czech people that control of their affairs would return to their own hands, stirred memories of the Prague Spring. The celebration of 1968 culminated on Friday, November 24, when Alexander Dubček joined Havel on the Melantrich balcony. The meeting broke up with chants of "Dubček to the Castle!" and calls for another mass demonstration, this time on the larger surface of Letná plain.¹¹

These repeated popular demonstrations could hardly be dispersed by the rapidly demoralized People's Militia, and although the party considered applying a "Tiananmen Square" solution using the Czechoslovak People's Army, that option failed in the Central Committee. Workers in large numbers participated in the demonstration on Thursday afternoon, November 23, and thereafter. Petr Miller, a worker from the ČKD factory, was coopted to the Civic Forum's leadership. His colleagues at the ČKD works demonstrated their attitude dramatically when Štěpán visited the factory to rally the workers against the students' strike demand. When he intoned, "We will not be dictated to by children," meaning the students, the workers roared back, to his visible discomfiture, "We are not children!"¹²

The federal government under Ladislav Adamec had been in contact with the OF leaders since November 21, and on Sunday, November 26, Adamec even addressed the crowds on Letná. By this time the KSC had finally met in a twice-postponed emergency session, on Friday, November 24. After trying to ditch only the most prominent "normalizers," Jakeš resigned. Other party leaders tainted by normalization remained in their functions, to the manifest discontent of OF and the people at the mass demonstrations. Under increasing pressure both from within the

party and from the streets, on November 26 the party dropped Štěpán (who also left his Prague district party functions), Lenárt, and other compromised figures.¹³

Both government and party were still vainly attempting to undermine the general strike with promises of dialogue and concerns over lost production. OF adopted a masterful strategy to counter appeals to economic worries. The strike would be symbolic, lasting two hours at midday, and students volunteered to man crucial shift work or emergency services so that production and public safety would not suffer. The general strike on November 27 was a great success. Surveys by an official institute indicated that countrywide almost half the population stopped work to some extent, the great majority of them for the full two hours. Another quarter publicly supported the strike in ways that OF and VPN had recommended short of a work stoppage. About 10 percent were prevented from showing support, and the remainder chose not to take part. Participation in Prague reached 57 percent.¹⁴ Public support made the strike the incontrovertible proof that the regime lacked all legitimacy. As the leaders of party and government absorbed that lesson, the pace of change quickened. On November 29, the Federal Assembly formally abrogated the constitutional guarantee of the “leading role” of the KSC, and removed the political monopoly of the NF and the ideological monopoly of Marxism-Leninism in national life.

The government reorganization proceeded more slowly. The new cabinet announced on December 3 fell far short of meeting the public’s wishes. Of the 21 members, 16 were communists, 2 were from the tame NF political parties, and 3 had no formal party membership. Even the government’s statement condemning the 1968 invasion as a “violation of the norms of relations between sovereign states,” won little favor. Several more days of mass demonstrations, together with OF’s refusal to support the new government, forced Adamec to resign on December 7. The Slovak communist and former deputy prime minister, Marián Čalfa, unveiled a new “government of national understanding” on December 10. For the first time since 1948, the communists were in a minority (9 out of 21 members). Celebrated dissidents who had been in prison or banished to manual labor weeks before, such as Jiří Dienstbier, Jan Čarnogurský, and Miroslav Kusý, also took roles in the new government.¹⁵ It was a caretaker regime that would prepare for a freely contested election to be held by June 1990.

OF and the other opponents of the regime felt that as long as Husák



Václav Havel addressing the crowds on Wenceslas Square with the news of the first non-communist government since 1948, December 10, 1989. (CTK photo)

was still president, there could be no guarantee that the changes would last. Thus while concentrating on the new government, they also called for Husák's resignation and "Havel to the Castle!"¹⁶ On December 10, after swearing in the new government, Husák finally resigned. By this time Havel was the leading candidate to succeed him, both inside OF and on the streets. Dubček was Havel's likeliest rival, and the communists seized upon his candidacy as a way of dividing the Czech and Slovak leaders.¹⁷ In the end, with grace, Dubček accepted the post of chairman of the Federal Assembly on December 28, 1989. The next day he presided over the ceremony in the Vladislav Hall in which the same body elected Havel ninth president of the republic.

The "Velvet Revolution" seems, even after more than a decade, to have an almost absurd or surrealist character. A small group of dissidents, together with the students and supported by growing masses of ordinary citizens at the public demonstrations, confronted a regime that had lost legitimacy. Neither side had a clear picture of what to do next. After years of principled but apparently fruitless opposition, dissident figures seemed at times bemused by the growing sense of their own power. Stories such as those told of Dienstbier, who overnight went from boiler stoker to foreign minister, emphasize the strangeness these dissidents felt at being catapulted from irrelevance to positions of real authority and responsibility.¹⁸ As it became convinced that it would be possible to push for more, OF gained confidence and increased its demands, while the party increasingly lost its bearings. The continued presence of thousands of ordinary Czechs and Slovaks at the demonstrations provided crucial leverage, while bringing more people into the movement as the costs of joining decreased with the decreasing likelihood of massive repression.¹⁹ Yet, while the crowds knew what they were against, they did not always have a clear picture of where they wanted to go. As Czechoslovakia entered the year 1990 under a non-communist government, the question that faced it and its new leaders was "where to now?"

THE SHORT LIFE AND HARD TIMES OF THE CZECH AND SLOVAK FEDERATIVE REPUBLIC

During the decade after the Velvet Revolution one of the most used (and overused) words applied to all the countries in East Central

Europe was “transition.” Among the many faces of the transition, three led the way: transition to democratic political systems, to free-market economies, and to pluralistic civil societies. This threefold transition was complicated by other concerns, including security questions after the Warsaw Pact dissolved, future relations to the USSR (itself disintegrating), and internal ethnic and national minority issues. As Czechoslovakia faced all these challenges, the underlying question of future relations between Czechs and Slovaks within the state gave them each added complexity.

The Triple Transition in the ČSFR

Practically everyone in Czechoslovakia by the end of 1989 was definite about one thing: they wanted to live in a genuine democracy, without adjectives like “people’s” or “socialist,” with which they had had such unhappy historical experiences. Thus Čalfa’s government saw its *raison d’être* in carrying out free elections for a truly democratic parliament. Aware of their tenuous legitimacy, the representatives in the two National Councils and the Federal Assembly agreed that they should change the constitution only with an electoral mandate. As a result, the transition to democracy began using the pseudo-democratic constitution of the ČSSR after 1969. Between April and May 1990, the assembly passed laws guaranteeing civic and economic freedoms such as freedom of association, assembly, and petition, establishing the legal equality of different forms of property, and allowing the creation of limited-liability companies and economic contacts with foreign firms. The assembly also adopted an electoral law with proportional representation and fixed party lists, as in the first republic.

Czechoslovakia’s first free, democratic elections were duly held on June 8–9, 1990. Voters elected delegates to both the Federal Assembly and the ČNR and SNR. The result, following the pattern of most of Czechoslovakia’s neighbors in the northern tier of the former Soviet bloc, was a massive repudiation of the communists.²⁰ After some hesitation, OF and VPN contested the elections as “movements,” still chary of the label “parties.” Three distinct groups cooperated in these movements. The dissidents who had opposed the regime in earlier years were joined by others who had occupied what one analyst called “parking orbits” in the old system: places where they built professional experience and expertise, developing skills needed now, while not openly opposing

the regime.²¹ Finally there were communists or former communists who also had desperately needed skills and were willing to repudiate the party.²²

Together OF and VPN polled nearly half of the votes cast (47 percent), which translated into 170 seats out of the 300-member Federal Assembly (itself divided into the House of Nations and the House of the People). The communists garnered 47 seats, with the Christian Democrats third with 40 seats.²³ In the simultaneous voting for the ČNR, OF's predominance was even greater, with a total of 127 mandates out of 200 going to its candidates. The communists followed far behind with 32 seats, while the autonomist coalition for Moravia and Silesia won 22 seats and the Christian Democrats won 19.²⁴ VPN and its allies in the Christian Democratic Movement similarly controlled the SNR.

One distinctive feature of Czechoslovakia's political landscape emerged already in the first free elections. In spite of the cooperation between OF and VPN, Czechoslovakia lacked any genuine statewide political movement or party. Even the KSČ was on its way to separating into two distinct parties. Instead, political forces organized themselves distinctly in each republic, a feature that influenced the institutional choices made by the three governments functioning on the basis of the 1990 elections, the federal, the Czech, and the Slovak.²⁵

The electoral law established the proportional system, which encouraged party proliferation, making it difficult for any single party to form a majority government. The system was also parliamentary, not presidential. The historical traditions of the first Czechoslovak state included Masaryk's powerful moral authority, but even his constitutional powers were limited. Havel, who for now enjoyed something like Masaryk's moral stature among his fellow citizens, wielded even less formal political power. Elected by the legislature and subject to its recall, he had no popular electoral legitimacy. Executive power rested with the prime minister, and as a nonpartisan figure, the president had to avoid openly supporting any party's political ideas.²⁶

During these first years of transition the political spectrum was unstable. The umbrella "movements" that won the 1990 elections sheltered a broad range of political views.²⁷ Predictably, once the elections were over and the communists repudiated, they began to reveal internal tensions, and finally broke up into more "normal" political parties. Attitudes to economic reform were a catalyst for the emergence of political parties, though personalities also played a role.

In February 1991 the Civic Forum formally split into political parties, the strongest of which was Václav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party (ODS). Two smaller parties with similar philosophies but incompatible personalities and ideas on organization also kept the "civic" label, the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA) and the Civic Movement (OH), led by Foreign Minister Dienstbier. These three parties cooperated in government until 1992. The center was held by a party with roots going back to the prewar People's party, the Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU–ČSL). On the left the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), as the KSČ eventually rechristened itself, stubbornly refused to become a social-democratic party of the Western European type. The KSČM initially overshadowed the revived Czechoslovak, later Czech, Social-Democratic Party (ČSSD). There was also an autonomist Moravian-Silesian coalition, and the Republican Party on the radical fringe.

The internal tensions within the VPN and between it and its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), led by Čarnogurský, increasingly focused on the VPN prime minister, Mečiar. When he was forced from office in 1991 and Čarnogurský took over, Mečiar turned his supporters into a new party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). The HZDS advocated preserving the social networks of the socialist regime and going slowly on privatization. The Party of the Democratic Left (SDL') re-created the Slovak communists as a mainstream European-style left-wing party. On the right the Slovak National Party (SNS) sometimes cooperated with Mečiar and sometimes criticized him. Slovakia's Hungarian minority had its own Christian-Democratic movement and a coalition entitled Coexistence, which later split into separate Hungarian parties and then recoalesced into another coalition.

Economic reform was central to all three government programs. Transition to a market economy was the accepted goal, but exactly how to achieve it remained debatable. One group of Czech government advisers favored a gradual approach. State-owned enterprises would be restructured under government supervision, and privatization would follow by finding private, possibly foreign, investment for the restructured companies. The classic example of this approach was the sale of a share of the flagship automobile company, Škoda-Mladá Boleslav, to Volkswagen in 1991. Potential problems with this approach included its slow pace and abuse by managers of state-owned companies, who might pri-

vativize them in their own interests or try not to compete with newly established private firms under their control. The advantage was to minimize the impact of the economic transformation on the population.

Klaus as federal finance minister argued that there was no alternative to rapid economic transformation. Klaus carried through some macroeconomic measures to begin the transformation, including currency devaluations in 1990, the removal of state control over most wholesale and retail prices on January 1, 1991, and the pursuit of restrictive monetary policies to restrain inflation. Transformation to a free market, however, required a fundamental shift to private ownership. Klaus and his advisers developed a plan featuring "coupon privatization" to change the structure of ownership in the country as rapidly as possible. All Czechoslovak citizens who paid a nominal fee received booklets of coupons, which they could exchange for shares in privatized enterprises, making the majority of citizens direct part-owners of the economy.²⁸

One unexpected feature of the coupon privatization was the emergence of investment funds. The brainchild of Viktor Kožený, a twenty-eight-year-old entrepreneur whose example was rapidly followed by banks and other institutions, the investment funds purchased citizens' coupon booklets for a fixed sum, promising impressive rates of return.²⁹ The investment funds with their guarantee of high returns for little outlay greatly stimulated the sales of coupon booklets, and the first wave of coupon privatization, initiated in May 1992, was considered a great success. Approximately 8.5 million citizens took part, either individually or through investment funds.

Though perhaps the gaudiest, the coupon scheme was not the only string to the privatization bow. More traditional means were also used, in the "great" and "small" privatizations. The small privatization sold small, service-oriented enterprises by auction beginning in January 1991. The great privatization sold selected large-scale manufacturing enterprises to concrete investors on the basis of government-approved plans, or to the highest bidder beginning in October 1991. One other privatization method was restitution, an effort to undo some of the injustices of the communist regime. Private real property seized by the state after February 25, 1948, was to be returned to its original owners or their heirs. Restitution raised uncomfortable issues with an international dimension, because the regime specifically drew the line at the communist seizure of power in 1948. This choice avoided the problem of restitution to Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia after 1945, but

it also left unresolved the issue of Jewish property seized by the Germans after 1939. In the end the government reached a compromise with Jewish property owners that returned their properties as fulfillment of promises made, but never carried out, by postwar governments. Restitution also raised the question of returning church holdings in arable and forest land, as well as the fate of monuments such as St. Vitus's cathedral in Prague.

In spite of these controversies, both the domestic and international response to the Czechoslovak economic program was positive. The economy did show a jump in inflation and negative GDP growth rate (see Table 3). The loss of the former CMEA market caused balance-of-trade problems as the ČSFR sought to reorient its trade to the West, but unemployment remained comparatively low, reflecting in part the government's slowness to close down large state-owned enterprises and in part the ability of the growing service sector to absorb workers. Tourism, focused largely on Prague but taking in other parts of the country

TABLE 3
ECONOMIC INDICATORS IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA,
1990–1992 (ANNUAL % CHANGE)

<i>Czechoslovakia</i>	1990	1991	1992
Inflation	10.0	57.9	11.8
Unemployment	1.7	6.6	5.5
GDP growth	-0.4	-16.4	-7.2
Industrial growth	-3.7	-23.1	-10.0
<i>Czech Lands</i>	1990	1991	1992
Inflation	9.9	56.6	12.7
Unemployment	1.1	4.4	2.6
GDP growth	-1.9	-14.5	-10.6
Industrial growth	—	-25.0	-10.6
<i>Slovakia</i>	1990	1991	1992
Inflation	10.3	61.2	10.0
Unemployment	2.3	11.8	10.4
GDP growth	-2.0	-15.8	-7.0
Industrial growth	-2.7	-24.9	-13.7

SOURCE: Carol Skalník Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation Versus State* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), p. 183.

as well, also provided jobs as it blossomed. In comparison with its neighbors, especially Poland and Hungary where “shock therapy” approaches to the economic transition won out, Czechoslovakia initially looked very successful.

Czechoslovakia’s foreign policy, as elsewhere in the region, was expressed in the slogan “back to Europe.” Symbolically this return to Europe was contraposed to the forty years of integration into foreign, economic, and security policy structures dominated by the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia contributed to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact on July 1, 1991, and on July 27 the last of the Soviet troops stationed on Czechoslovak soil after 1968 left. The CMEA was wound up in the same year. Czechoslovakia, which had been one of the founding members of the IMF and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, rejoined those bodies on September 20, 1990. As early as February 21, 1990, Czechoslovakia became a member of the Council of Europe, and it signed an association agreement with the European Union on December 16, 1991. Regional initiatives, such as the “Visegrád Three,” christened at a meeting there between the presidents of Poland, Hungary, and the ČSFR on February 15, 1991, always played second fiddle to the longed-for return to “Europe.”³⁰ Nevertheless, the Visegrád states created the Central Europe Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in 1992.

Standing astride the road back to “Europe” was Germany. The German question interconnected problems of foreign affairs, national identity, and Czech-Slovak relations: Germany was the economic model of what most Czechs aspired to, and also the likeliest foreign investor in their privatizing economy. The German issue also opened memories of the Czech and Slovak experience in World War II, especially the Munich conference and the destruction of Czechoslovakia, the wartime Slovak state, and the postwar expulsion of the Germans. The German question raised issues about what kind of society the Czechs and Slovaks were forming, and whether their attitude to this complicated past said anything about their present-day ability to create a pluralistic, civil society.

Already before the fall of communism, dissident circles had discussed the expulsion.³¹ In a gesture that unleashed media debate on the same issues, at Christmas 1989 Havel sent a letter to West German president Richard von Weizsäcker in which he called the expulsion “a deeply immoral act,” for which he apologized.³² The ensuing public reaction demonstrated how sensitive the Sudeten German question remained,

with opinion firmly against Havel. In March 1990, von Weizsäcker returned Havel's gesture during a state visit to Prague on the anniversary of the Nazi occupation.³³ Negotiations on a treaty of friendship and mutual cooperation proceeded over the next year and a half. Then at the last minute, Slovak politicians objected to language in the preamble recognizing that "the Czechoslovak state has never ceased to exist since 1918," which ignored the Slovak state from 1939 to 1945. Nevertheless, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Havel finally signed the treaty on February 27, 1992.³⁴

Because the treaty specifically left property questions outside its scope, however, the Czech-German relationship was not definitively settled by its ratification. On the Czech side, the government refused to negotiate directly with representatives of the expelled Sudeten Germans.³⁵ On the German side, the political significance of the Sudeten German organizations, especially to the Bavarian Christian Social Union, the federal Christian Democratic Union's partners, gave them leverage that they used to keep the issue open.

These issues of retribution and restitution had a broader counterpart in a more general need to overcome the past, specifically the communist past. They also had a personal dimension for individual Czechs and Slovaks. During the twenty years of normalization, only a relative handful of people became active dissidents. Others made the personal compromises necessary to pursue education, a career, protect their family, and gain access to scarce goods or other benefits. Still others opportunistically supported and participated in the regime. The psychological fallout from this situation added a painful and embarrassing undertone to the problem of what to do with the major Czechoslovak communist leaders. There were calls to try those who collaborated with the Soviet invasion in 1968, but although the Czechoslovak government publicly identified twenty-one party officials (five of them already deceased) as traitors, for the moment no trials ensued. Only Štěpán was tried and sentenced to two and a half years for ordering the November 17, 1989, attack.³⁶ Trying the former KSČ leadership did not, in any case, address another troubling aspect of the past, the network of informers and collaborators controlled by the secret police (StB).

Though the StB was abolished in January 1990, its files still existed like unexploded land mines buried under the political landscape. Thousands of people were named in its registers of agents. This situation drove the interest in "lustration," a term with roots in Classical Latin,

where it refers to a sacrifice of ritual purification. Lustration involved many motives, not all of them praiseworthy. In addition to the desire to deal with the past, there were fears that compromised politicians would be subject to blackmail. Political calculations also played a part, beginning just before the first free elections in 1990 when the leader of the People's Party was exposed as an StB agent, ending his political career and damaging the KDU-ČSL.³⁷ A parliamentary commission took up the lustration of members of parliament, and presented its findings on live television, but without the desired effect.³⁸ The case of Jan Kavan illustrates the ambiguities of relying on secret police records to document collaboration. Kavan, who for twenty years had actively opposed the regime and supported dissidents from his British exile, formally cleared his name only in 1996, but in 1998 became Czech foreign minister.

In an attempt to regularize the situation, the federal parliament passed a lustration law in October 1991. For a period of five years no one who had joined or collaborated with the StB, or had held a high party position, could serve in elected or appointed office in the government or administration, or on companies in which the state held a stake. Critics of the law spoke of witch hunts and suggested that its aim was to rid the ODS of rivals such as the dissident-dominated OH, as well as the Slovak center-left and Vladimir Mečiar (against whom unsubstantiated allegations of collaboration were in fact raised).³⁹

Czech-Slovak Relations and the Velvet Divorce

As these problems illustrate, the transition in almost all its facets involved Czech-Slovak relations. Initially, placing these relations on a new footing looked no more difficult than other challenges facing the Czechs and Slovaks. Both sides agreed that the 1969 federalization was unsatisfactory, but were confident that a new, more enduring relationship would be attained. Signs that it would not be that easy emerged early in 1990 with the "hyphen war." When President Havel proposed that "Socialist" be dropped from the country's official name, Slovak representatives suggested spelling the reborn state's name "Czechoslovak Republic." After much apparently needless wrangling, the assembly approved the use of the hyphen in Slovakia and no hyphen in the Czech lands. This unwieldy solution was replaced with a completely new name, the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic.⁴⁰ Symbols matter,

and behind the “hyphen war” lay a history of unresolved questions about the Czech-Slovak relationship.

How did it come about that the resolution eventually chosen was to separate into two independent states? On the one hand, the international setting, for once in the history of this bumpy relationship, was not one of threatening crisis. The Soviet Union was focused on internal concerns, and indeed it also eventually dissolved. Germany’s postwar democratization and integration into Western Europe lessened the threat from that side. Thus, unlike in 1938 and 1968, discussions of the Czech-Slovak relationship did not take place in an atmosphere of imminent crisis. On the other hand, the international considerations that had brought Czechs and Slovaks together in 1918 and again after 1945 had lost their potency. After the expulsion of the Germans, the Czechs no longer needed the Slovaks to offset an internal minority. The ČSFR still contained a significant Hungarian population, but Slovak fears of Hungarian revisionism (though never absent) were dulled by the sense that the international system would not allow Hungary to expand against its neighbors.⁴¹ Historical memories of previous critical moments in the relationship were thus more likely to reinforce negative images and expectations (for the Czechs, that the Slovaks “always” took advantage of their life-or-death crises, for the Slovaks, that the Czechs would never take them seriously until the knife was against their throats).⁴²

Another fateful historical legacy was the federal structure inherited from the communist ČSSR, which remained in effect while the first freely elected parliament prepared a new Czechoslovak constitution within its two-year term. The federal institutions in the ČSSR constitution had existed in a centralized one-party dictatorship where they were actually irrelevant. Now these institutions operated in a free, contested, and multiparty environment. The structure of the legislature, with federal, Czech, and Slovak parliaments sharing power, has already been described. Let us look more closely at the Federal Assembly. It consisted of a 150-member upper house, the Chamber of the People, elected by the total population through proportional representation, and a lower house, the Chamber of the Nations, composed of seventy-five representatives from the Czech lands and seventy-five from Slovakia.⁴³ Both houses had to approve legislation, and on certain key issues, such as constitutional amendments, declarations of war, and the election of the president, majority rule was suspended. Such legislation required not only a three-fifths majority in the upper house, but a similar majority in

both national sections of the lower house. Thus only thirty-one Slovak or Czech deputies could block any constitutional amendment, a feature that could make passing constitutional legislation extremely difficult.⁴⁴

The structure of the state also contributed to the emergence of separate Czech and Slovak party systems after 1990.⁴⁵ The leaders of the ČNR and SNR and their respective governments tended to seek first the interests of “their” constituency and not the federation. Discussions over the relative competence of the federal and republic institutions—in which Czech premier Petr Pithart and his Slovak counterpart Mečiar stressed “strong republics” as the foundation for a strong federation—led in December 1990 to the passage of a constitutional amendment under which the federation retained control of defense, foreign affairs, monetary and economic policies, and ethnic minority questions, but the republics gained broad economic powers. The republics continued to exist within the federal structure but increasingly went their own ways.⁴⁶

Still other institutional factors contributed to the competitive behavior of the political elites. The lability of voter allegiances meant that nearly all votes were up for grabs and encouraged politicians to seek vote-getting issues. Appeals to national sentiment worked well. The lack of a strong tradition of elite cooperation also played a role. Under communism, even within the party, elites tended to circulate within either the Czech lands or Slovakia. Some extra-party cooperation among dissidents did exist, but such ties were occasional and limited. The role of the former dissidents also declined, especially after the 1992 elections.⁴⁷ All these factors made negotiations between representatives of the federal, Czech, and Slovak governments over the form of an “authentic federation” a recurrent source of disagreement.

These negotiations began as early as April 1990 and continued through several rounds, until just before the elections in June 1992.⁴⁸ The two sides approached the concept of the federation from fundamentally different positions. From the Czech perspective, Czechoslovakia already existed as a federation and the question was to determine what competencies it could transfer without rendering it incapable of functioning as an effective state. Thus Czechs favored a strong federation with significant powers reserved for the central authorities. From the Slovak side this attitude smacked of the stereotypical “Pragocentrism,” and their starting point was the existence of two states, Slovakia and the Czech lands. The question was what of their own powers these two states would give up to the central institutions. In some Slovak versions

the Czech-Slovak federation resembled a confederation or even just a loose commonwealth with a minimum of power granted to the federal level.⁴⁹

Mečiar's dismissal in April 1991 changed the faces at the table, but it did not alter the issues.⁵⁰ In conversations with Pithart, Čarnogurský maintained that an agreement between the two republics should take the form of a state treaty, preceding any new federal constitution. The Czechs considered a treaty acceptable as a political initiative, but felt it would not be internationally binding because the federation already existed.⁵¹ In continuing discussions Pithart's government agreed to accept a treaty, and in January 1992 both national councils created commissions to draft it. In February, these commissions and representatives from all three governments hammered out a text, which was to be submitted to the ČNR and SNR for approval. At the SNR presidium meeting on March 12, the proposal failed to reach the agenda for the full council by a single vote. Both sides agreed to postpone further discussions until after the 1992 elections.⁵²

TABLE 4
CZECH AND SLOVAK OPINION
ON THE PREFERRED FORM
OF STATE (PERCENT)

<i>In favor of (percent)</i>	<i>Unitary State</i>	<i>Federa- tion</i>	<i>Confedera- tion</i>	<i>Indepen- dence</i>	<i>Other/Don't Know</i>
<i>June 1990</i>					
Czech Republic	30	45	—	12	13
Slovakia	14	63	—	13	6
<i>November 1991</i>					
Czech Republic	39	30	4	5	22
Slovakia	20	26	27	14	13
<i>March 1992</i>					
Czech Republic	34	27	6	11	22
Slovakia	13	24	32	17	12

SOURCE: Carol Skalník Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation Versus State* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), p. 138.

The 1992 elections were fought primarily on economic issues, though in Slovakia the right to sovereignty was also significant. Nevertheless, questions about the economic transformation of the ČSFR necessarily also influenced Czech-Slovak relations. Klaus, contesting the elections as head of the ODS, continued to argue that a rapid economic restructuring program was necessary. In Slovakia, economic fears stemming from Slovakia's reliance on the arms industry and other heavy industries in large factories made Slovak politicians favor a slower-paced reform with more concern for the social consequences. In Czech eyes, the Slovak reluctance to bite the bullet fitted the stereotype of Slovakia as a recipient of Czech investment and resources. Slovaks pointed out that they suffered disproportionately from the economic changes already and could only expect it to get worse under Klaus's proposals (see Table 3).⁵³ Thus economic policies and economic fears also played a role in the impending dissolution of the federation. Deadlocked political institutions prevented a resolution of economic policy questions without a resolution of the question of Czech-Slovak relations.

The results of the elections, held on June 5–6, 1992, were a victory for Klaus and the ODS in the Czech lands, and for Mečiar and HZDS in Slovakia, each with approximately 30 percent of the vote.⁵⁴ The voters had spoken: what they had said was not clear. The outcome of the 1992 elections was not an endorsement for the eventual dissolution of the federation. All public opinion research carried out at the time suggested that the majority of both Czechs and Slovaks wanted to live in a common state. These results fueled calls for a referendum, some from President Havel himself. It is probable that opponents of a referendum did fear to put the question to the test of a general vote. On the other hand, the public opinion evidence says nothing about *what kind* of common state the Czechs and Slovaks imagined living in. As Table 4 shows, changes in support for different forms of state over time included a small but regular increase in Slovak sentiment for independence, a dramatic collapse of Slovak support for a federation, but no clear preference on the form of a common state. Clearly, however, the majority of Czechs in 1992 joined their leaders in favoring a strong centralist form (either unitary or federal) while the Slovaks similarly supported in greatest numbers a looser, confederal structure. Since this was precisely the issue on which political discussion continually foundered, a public vote that returned such a result would in effect have resolved nothing.

Immediately after the elections, President Havel asked Klaus, as

leader of the strongest party, to form the federal government.⁵⁵ Mečiar insisted on negotiations with Klaus first about the government's composition. After several meetings, Klaus announced that he was uninterested in becoming federal prime minister, since the Slovak side viewed the government's role as liquidating the federation. Eventually, the two parties agreed on the composition of a caretaker federal government. Mečiar became Slovak prime minister; Klaus headed a Czech coalition government.⁵⁶ Not only did the federal government have fewer ministries than the Czech and Slovak governments, they also were led by second-level politicians.

In the initial post-election meetings, while Mečiar and Klaus were meeting privately, Michal Kováč described to the rest of the Czech delegation the Slovak plans to return to the 1968 concept of an economic and defense union. When this indiscretion was relayed to Klaus in the plenary meeting, Mečiar turned "pale, then ashen, apparently crumbling on the inside. . . . The battle was over before it had begun. It was time to haggle and to sign a peace treaty."⁵⁷ That haggling still took several weeks, during which Havel's term as president expired. The HZDS refused to back his reelection bid on July 3, which failed as a result, though legally he was still president for five months. In fulfillment of the Slovak government program, the SNR overwhelmingly adopted a declaration of sovereignty on July 17, stating that "the thousand-year-long struggle of the Slovak nation for identity has been fulfilled."⁵⁸ Within hours, Havel tendered his resignation to the federal assembly, effective July 20. Havel denied that he resigned in protest against the Slovak declaration, but stated that he could not fulfill the oath he took to the ČSFR by remaining in office.⁵⁹ Czechoslovakia spent its last months without a president.

As the ČSSD led efforts to head off the dissolution, it appeared that Mečiar and the HZDS were hesitating, hoping to prepare for statehood under some form of arrangement with the Czech lands. Klaus and the ODS now became the ones pushing for a radical resolution. A basic agreement on the end of the federation as of December 31, 1992, reached at a meeting in Brno on August 26, was eventually presented to the Federal Assembly on October 27. Meanwhile, the SNR had adopted a new constitution for Slovakia. The Czech government moved more slowly, but it submitted a draft constitution to the ČNR on November 10. The federal parliament approved the law ending the federation on November 25. The Czech constitution was finally adopted on December

16, and the final session of the federal parliament was held on December 17. At midnight, as 1992 turned to 1993, the Czechoslovak state formally ceased to exist.

The dissolution of Czechoslovakia was thus not quite as “velvet” as the label suggests. The Czech-Slovak “divorce” did, however, take place in a legislative, orderly, and nonviolent way. In spite of friction during their more than seven decades of shared statehood, Czechs and Slovaks had never used violence against each other. Neither the Czech lands nor Slovakia had large settled populations of the other nationality. Instead of demands for border revisions or saber-rattling threats to protect “fellow-nationals” under alien oppression, the question of Czechs in Slovakia and Slovaks in the Czech lands was therefore simply another item to be settled by mutual agreement.⁶⁰ Even the institutional arrangements that contributed to the eventual Czech-Slovak “divorce” also contributed to the peaceful dissolution of the federation and the resolution of the questions arising from it. Thus if the failure of the seventy-three-year Czechoslovak experiment in sharing a common state highlights the problems of democracy in a multinational setting, at least it also suggests that—given the right conditions—democratic institutions can help a peaceful resolution of those problems through separation.⁶¹