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Václav Havel
and the Czechoslovak Dissident Communist Regime's
Thoughts on Western European Peace Activism
During the Cold War
Review of Václav Havel's Essay *Anatomy of a Restraint*
(*Anatomie jedné zdrženlivosti*), April 1985

In this challenging period of several world military conflicts and the subsequent desire of mainly citizens of democratic countries for immediate peace, which has even become the topic of many political elections in several parts of the world, I came across a political-philosophical essay by a former dissident of the communist regime and later president of Czechoslovakia, and then the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. I came across the essay through a journalistic study of modern ideologies¹, regarding the campaign of peace activists from

¹ David Klimeš. 11.12.2019. Rozhovory. Žádné klimatické peklo nás nečeká. A co Havel? Byl opravdový liberál, ne jako ti dnešní. S europoslancem Alexandrem Vondrou o boji proti Zeleným, sladkým jablkům, velkým skokom Mariána Čalfy a tiež o Václavu Havlovi (Interviews, No climate hell awaits us. What about Havel? He was a true liberal, not like the ones today. With MEP Alexander Vondra on the fight against the Greens, sweet apples, the great leap of Marian Čalfa and also Václav Havel). <https://nazory.aktualne.cz/rozhovory/zadne-klimaticke-peklo-nas-neceka-a-havel-byl-opravdovy-libe-r-2bb1b81e1acd11ea926e0cc47ab5f122/> (20.09.2024).

free countries of Western Europe coming to agitate for the so-called “peace of the world”².

In this literary reflection (written illegally during communism), playwright, dissident and later president of Czechoslovakia, and later the Czech Republic, Václav Havel attempts to define the closed attitudes of Eastern European dissidents towards the Western European peace movement of the 1980s. Here we are historically in a very tense period of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Perestroika had not yet begun (nor had the Chernobyl disaster happened), and the Central European countries of the Soviet zone, after the rise of Polish Solidarity, were beginning to feel the economic backwardness of the Eastern European economy in the days of US President Ronald Reagan’s “space” policy. Václav Havel was here explaining, as nuclear weapons were being deployed in Western Europe, why the Greens and peace activists were wrong.

1. There is no popular militarism in communist Czechoslovakia (1985), but struggle for peace is a suspicious term

Havel begins his reflections in the first subsection of his essay with a characterization of the dissidents of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. According to him, dissidents are not like enclaves to the whole of society, although they differ from the majority “in that they express their views loudly and without regard for the consequences”. However, their views do not really differ from the majority of society; on the contrary, they are a more peaceful, loyal and a less radical part of society.

In the second sub-chapter Havel points out that since the word “peace” was deprived of its content in the communist bloc, signs such as: “Building the Fatherland – Consolidating Peace” or “USSR – Guarantee of World Peace”, “For the Further Development of the Peace Work of Our People” and so on. Throughout this period, citizens had to carry the same-sounding peace banners to political rallies, accompanied by state-paid tours of various peace congresses, and some especially engaged in overturning the official ones even cleverly qualified themselves here as

² Václav Havel. 1985. Anatomie jedné zdrženlivosti (Anatomy of a Restraint). In Václav Havel. *Do různých stran: Eseje a články, rozhovory a prohlášení z let 1983–1989. Výběr textů z let 1965–1969*. Sestavil Vilém Prečan (Different destination. Essays and articles 1983–1989. Compiled by Vilém Prečan). Čs. dokumentační středisko nezávislé literatury ve spolupráci s Nadací Charty 77 ve Stockholmu (Documentation Centre for the Promotion of Independent Czechoslovak Literature in Collaboration with Charta 77 Foundation) Scheinfeld-Schwarzenberg: Vydavatelství Disident v zahraničí 1989, 57–83.

“peace fighters”. The “struggle for peace” has thus become an integral part of the ideological façade of the system we live in here.

But this struggle for peace is only a cover or the pacifist pharisaism of the communist regime. Havel adds, however, that every Czechoslovak citizen knows from his thousands of daily and quite personal experiences that behind this official façade highlighted above lies a completely different and increasingly grim reality: the bleakness of life in a totalitarian state, the omnipotence of the centre of power and the powerlessness of the population. The word “peace”, like “socialism”, “homeland” or “people”, is only one rung on the ladder on which all-able people climb, and one of the expressions towards the so-called displaced people who are being beaten and who have been “cast aside” (cut off from the possibility of their own development). It is one of the ritual incantations that the government constantly mutters (or what it is told to mutter from Moscow), and which the people must mutter together if they want to have even relative peace.

Is it any wonder, then, that this word evokes distrust, scepticism, ridicule and disgust in the local population? Havel points out, however, that it is not peace as such that is being resisted, but the pyramid of lies of which the word is a part.

2. The perverse meaning of anti-imperialist pacifism

In the third subsection of his reflection, Havel asks: Who is the official “peace struggle” in Czechoslovakia against? He himself answers that, of course, against the Western imperialists and their weapons. In communist Czechoslovakia, “the word peace meant nothing other than the unquestioning acceptance of the policies of the Soviet bloc and clear rejection of the West”. Indeed, “Western imperialists” are not referred to in our neo-people’s language³ as worldview-obsessed individuals, but as more or less democratically elected Western governments and a more or less democratic political system.

Then Havel adds another suspicious circumstance: for decades the communist media have systematically tried to create the impression in their foreign coverage that the West is only fighting for peace – in a local sense, of course. Therefore, the peace movement is presented as an expression of the fact that Westerners are looking forward to Soviet-style communism. What can a normal citizen think in such a situation? And Havel answers honestly that the Western peace fighters shou-

³ This phrase refers to the wartime Slovak state (1939–1945), which was ruled by the Hlinka’s People Party.

ld soon have the opportunity to experience our communism, which would punish them for their naivety and inconsistency.

The Czech playwright Havel assumes that some people in the West think that the whole Western peace movement is the work of Soviet espionage. Others see it as a chorus of naive dreamers whose great zeal and lack of information are cleverly exploited by the Soviets. He himself holds no such views. At the very least, however, it seems that if it were possible to find out what people in Eastern Europe really think, it would be found that these views have more adherents among them than in the West itself.

In the fourth sub-chapter, Havel argues that the more enlightened Western champions of peace call not only for the disarmament of their own countries, but also for the parallel disarmament of all powers (including the Soviets) and freedom of speech for all. And instead of fighting Pershing (US missiles), they expect the people of Eastern Europe to fight against various types of SS (Soviet missiles). This is, of course, sensible; let everyone start sweeping up at home. But Havel wants to stress something that is sometimes forgotten: that any – even preliminary – disagreement with government policy on a sensitive issue like defence is infinitely more dangerous here than in the West. You become a dissident forever.

3. Can the so-called struggle for peace actually be an ideological position and is peace a gender question?

In the fifth subchapter Havel reflects on the situation in the Soviet bloc, which he characterizes as a tension between “their” omnipotence and the citizen’s powerlessness.

In fact, the ordinary citizen does not know whether it makes sense to sign a petition for peace or not, because either act can be considered as a provocation. Such a citizen has no influence on the far less important things going on in his country or his district, and that is how he perceives such global issues. Such aloofness is thus an understandable consequence of the social atmosphere in which the Czechoslovak citizen is destined to live.

In the sixth sub-chapter, Havel points out that the personal relationship between people in Central Europe and members of Western European peace movements (much more than the trivial suspicion that it is a communist enterprise) stems from local scepticism and utopianism. People wonder if Western peace activists are just more utopian. So, is peace just a project of Western utopianism versus moral life in a totalitarian state? Havel goes on to ask whether I should be troubled by some

dream of a peaceful, unarmed, democratic Europe of independent nations if the mere mention of such a dream can trouble me for the rest of my life? Is it not better to try to live such a miserable life with dignity – so that I do not have to be ashamed in front of my children – than to be involved in some Platonic organisation of a future Europe? Here, however, he admits that it is necessary to say that this distrust applies to every utopian, not only to leftists: even to militant anti-communism, where caution is guided by obsession and the reality of dreams.

Havel points to the fact that scepticism towards utopianism naturally goes hand in hand with scepticism towards various types and manifestations of ideology. Despite his own life experience, he himself is very surprised at how deeply infected with ideology many Western European citizens are, much more so than so-called Eastern Europeans living in and through a pre-ideological world. It is a perpetual and tiresome examination by so-called Western Europeans of whether this or that attitude, opinion or person is right of centre or left of centre, and so on. As if this attitude were more than the content of the opinion itself, as if it were a drawer into which one had to put one's head. Havel understands, however, that in a world of open (free) political opinions, it is probably impossible to resist this completely. In an environment where "ideology has completely neutered truth", however, this attitude seems misguided, petty, and far from what it really is.

Havel adds that this may be a global or simplistic interpretation, but it seems to him that anyone who is really serious about the future of Europe and the world should – for their own sake and for the sake of their general education – be aware of the various aspects of this scepticism, which is based on the fact that people – at the heart of Europe – have to project "bright tomorrows". Few people would probably be happier than a Pole, a Czechoslovak or a Hungarian if Europe were soon to become a free community of independent countries in which no superpower had armies and missiles. And at the same time, few are so sceptical of the hope that it would be possible to achieve this goal by appealing to someone's goodwill that they would voluntarily agree to such an appeal. Few, unlike us, have had the opportunity to see for themselves the purpose of the presence of great power armies and missiles in some European countries: far more than to defend against an intended enemy, these weapons are there to guard conquered territory.

In the seventh subchapter Havel interprets an anecdote: in the 1980s two beautiful Italian girls came to communist Prague with a women's manifesto in which they also demanded good things – respect for human rights, disarmament, demilitarised education for children, respect for human beings. They were collecting signatures of women from both halves of divided Europe. Our playwright was amazed: these activists could have been sailing peacefully on some rich husband's yacht (they

would have found them, I m sure) – instead they were racing across Europe to make the world a better place. He felt sorry for them because almost none of the Prague dissidents wanted to sign their names (of course, they did not even try to reach out to non-dissidents). Perhaps it was because the Prague dissidents disagreed with the content of the manifesto. However, without mutual agreement, these dissident women collectively had another reason: it seemed ridiculous to them that they should sign something “as women”. The gentlemen, who did not have to sign, paid gallant attention to the event of these girls with a silent smile. The women had a rather energetic dislike for everything, disliking most of all that they were not deprived of the choice to sign or not to sign, and that they felt no need for gallantry (Havel adds that about five of them eventually signed the petition).

Havel goes on to suggest that “peaceful” government theses with constant references to women and children have been domesticated in Czechoslovakia into televised speeches “with false sentiment”. However, the persecuted dissidents were also aware of the “sad state of women in the communist country”. At the same time, however, they were somehow bothered by this slight hint of feminism, which could be interpreted from the fact that the anti-war manifesto of Western European activists was supposed to be strictly feminine. “In a communist country, enthusiastic emotion and rationalist utopianism are two sides of the same coin”.

According to Havel, people in the West, for various reasons, are more afraid of war than those who live under communism. At the same time, they are much freer, they live more freely, and their opposition to armaments does not have too serious consequences. All this combined makes the peace activists there sometimes – at least when seen from a communist country – too serious, even slightly pathetic. Another thing we may not be aware of here in communism is the fact that the Western peace activist’s struggle is perhaps something more than just making these and other demands for disarmament: that is, an opportunity to create non-conformist and non-corrupt social structures, to live in a more humane community, to self-realise within the stereotypes of consumer society and to show resistance to them.

Havel notes that the distrust of commitment and any commitment that fails to distance one from the other is also likely to have an effect on the restraint he himself analyses. By attending a little more to our concern for the fate of the world, we may have a stronger need for our own shame, the desecration of the altar that Bakhtin writes so well about. And that is why we must be a little more reticent, as if anyone wanted us to be, about the various manifestations of the over-serious (and at the same time – relatedly – in any case paid for) commitment with which some

Western peace activists come to us. It would be absurd to impose on them our black humour and eternal scepticism, or even to require them to submit to our serious tests, while at the same time ironizing them on our way. But it would also be absurd for them to demand of us their own brand of decisiveness. "To understand is not to conform to one another, but to understand the identity of others".

4. A false peace in the history of Czechoslovakia (Munich 1938)

In the eighth subchapter, Havel notes that there are, of course, other reasons for restraint. For example: The Czechs and Slovaks knew all too well their own fate (since they had not yet recovered from it), i.e. the consequences of where the policy of appeasement could lead. Historians may debate for years to come whether the world would have had to survive the Second World War with millions of dead if Western democracy had been able to confront Hitler in time and with vigour. In this way, Havel wonders whether it is surprising that in this country, whose modern decline began with Munich (1938), people are particularly sensitive to anything that remotely reminds them of the pre-war capitulation to evil? We do not know how much courage could be found in this marginal situation in our country. We do know, however, that one idea is already very firmly established in the general consciousness here: "that the failure to use life in extreme cases to save its meaning and human dimension leads not only to the loss of its meaning, but inevitably to the loss of life – and not just one life, but thousands and millions of lives".

Of course, Havel continues, in a world of nuclear weapons there are many different ways to show humanity. But the basic experience that "one can not quietly tolerate violence in the hope that it will stop on its own is still valid" (to think otherwise would be, among other things, to capitulate definitively to the inhumanity of technology). We cannot imagine – if by some miracle such an attitude did not bring war closer, but actually prevented it – what kind of world, what kind of humanity, what kind of life and what kind of "peace" would open the door for us. "Something else, however, is the general moral imperative and the specific political way to follow it". We think there are more effective and meaningful ways to counter violence or the threat of violence than to blindly imitate it (i.e., for every enemy missile, immediately attack it with another).

Therefore, just one example to illustrate: what confidence or even admiration the ordinary but sensitive citizen of Eastern Europe can have for the Western peace movement, who has noticed that this movement has not vigorously protested against it at any of its congresses and at any of its demonstrations of hundreds of thousands

of demonstrators, that a large European state had invaded the territory of its smaller neutral neighbour and has since waged a bloody war on its territory, in which a million people and three million refugees have died (Havel here recalls the actual Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1985)? Really: what to think of a movement for peace and European dignity that knows nothing at all of any war that European states are waging today? The argument that a broken country and its defenders enjoy the sympathy of the Western European establishment and therefore do not deserve the support of the left can only serve an unreasonable ideological purpose: utter disgust and a sense of boundless despair.

5. Reasons for sympathy with Western pacifism. Internal and public peace as the work of free men and of a state which respects the human rights of its citizens

In the ninth and penultimate sub-chapter Havel notes that the peaceful refraining from signing petitions for peace by people, and especially dissidents, from various Eastern European countries has various causes. However, one can trace in their statements the “lowest common denominator”, i.e. some basic ideas about peace and the peace movement on which they could probably all agree:

1. Perhaps above all – despite all restraint – there is an “elementary sympathy for the moral ethics” of those who, in the midst of an advanced consumer society, are interested in the fate of the world “for the common interest of their own good”. Havel asks whether, despite different conditions, we are doing the same for ourselves? For this “rational first” reason, local dissidents must have a fundamental weakness for the Western peace movement.
2. However, the condemnation of wars is already obviously polemical: “the cause of the danger of war is not the weapons *per se*, but the political realities” (including the politics of the political establishment) of a divided Europe and a divided world, which directly enable or dictate the production and installation of these weapons, and which may ultimately involve their use. “Ordinary resistance to this or that weapon cannot achieve lasting and genuine peace”, because such resistance only affects the “consequences, and in any case not the causes”, of military conflicts. However, opposition to weapons – if directed at all of them, and not just those around which to camp – can at best force governments to accelerate various disarmament negotiations. That is probably all that can be expected from this course of action.

3. "Disarmament negotiations", even if successful (which, based on past experience, can hardly be hoped for), "would not solve" today's crisis. For what has so far been postponed by agreement has been restarted without agreement. More favourable climatic conditions could be created for a real solution to the crisis. However, climatic conditions are one thing and the will to solve is another. In essence, it would be nothing other than an explosive fixation on the *status quo* – with only a small amount of explosive technology.
4. Thus, the only meaningful path to a genuine European peace, not just an unarmed or "non-military" ceasefire, is a "radical change in the political reality that is creating the crisis today". Such a path would require both sides to radically break with the politics of defence and the consolidation of the *status quo*, with the division of Europe into blocs and with the politics of power or great power interests, and to subordinate all their efforts to something quite different: "the ideal of a democratic Europe as a friendly community of free and independent peoples. Peace in Europe today is not threatened by the prospect of change, but by the current situation".
5. "Without free, decent and competent citizens, there are no free and independent nations. Without internal peace, i.e. between citizens and between citizens and the state, there is no guarantee of external peace: a state that ignores the will and rights of other citizens does not guarantee that it will respect the will and rights of other people, nations and states. A state that denies its citizens the right to control public power cannot be controlled in international relations either. A state that denies its citizens their basic human rights becomes dangerous to its neighbours". Capriciousness inevitably also develops into capriciousness in foreign relations; the suppression of public opinion, the abrogation of public contracts of power and their public exercise allow power to arm itself in any way; a manipulated population can be exploited for any military adventure; untrustworthiness somehow raises legitimate concerns about trustworthiness in everything. "A state that has no scruples about deceiving its population has no scruples about deceiving other states". It follows from all this that "respect for human rights is a prerequisite for real peace and its only real guarantee". The suppression of the natural rights of citizens and peoples does not guarantee peace, but endangers it. "Lasting peace and disarmament can only be the work of free men". It is incomprehensible to us in the Eastern Bloc "how anyone today can believe in the possibility of disarmament, which can avoid man or has even been redeemed by his enslavement". It seems to be the craziest utopia,

comparable perhaps only to the hope that all the weapons in the world today will be scrapped or turned into musical instruments. Similarly, Western peace activists, who enjoy unprecedented freedoms at home and oppose our call for human rights by claiming that it only complicates the situation and hinders understanding, seem to be beyond common sense.

6. Putting real pacifism into practice. Prophecies from the days of communism

In the last ten subsections, Havel attempts to trace the practical possibilities of his views. He argues that if our Central European dissidents ask how to translate our general (“philosophical”) conception into the reality of political events, then the relevant problems come. Our Polish and Hungarian friends consider the first, even the main step towards a transformation of the *status quo* in Europe, and therefore a realistic pace, to be the creation on our territories of a kind of “zone of neutral states”, replacing the present sharp border of the two blocs. Havel considers this unrealistic and selfish.

Others think that the two blocs facing each other should be “dissolved”, which should be linked to the destruction of all nuclear weapons installed in Europe or directed against each other. That sounds good to Havel, but he was not quite sure who or what would compel the Soviet Union to disband its entire platoon of European satellites in this way, since it is clear that it would have to say goodbye to its political dominance over them.

In 1985, however, there were well-founded voices that Europe would remain divided as long as Germany remained divided. Therefore, a peace treaty with Germany should be called for, which would confirm today’s European borders, but at the same time open up the prospect of a gradual confederal reunification of the German states. The dissolution of the military pacts could be much more realistic after the German question has been settled. However, even this proposal remains highly provocative, as many fear a united Germany and its dominance in Europe.

However, dissidents are also divided on the question of their relationship to the United States. On one side of the spectrum is anti-Americanism at least as strong as the left in Western Europe, and on the other side is the so-called Reaganesque position: the USSR is an evil empire and the United States is an empire of good. Havel personally has no illusions about the US, the US establishment and US foreign policy, but the “level of domestic freedoms”, and hence of inter-

national political credibility, seems to him so diametrically opposed to both the US and the USSR that he simply does not regard today's situation as symmetrical, in the sense that both giants are equally dangerous, which is, in his view, a terrible oversimplification. Yes, they are both dangerous, mutually, but certainly not equally dangerous.

Finally, the dissidents fear the utopian signatures on the peace petition for a pacifist organisation of Europe, and these activities give a vague sense of the futility and absurdity of such considerations (even despair and hopelessness). Secret state security agents often told religious dissidents that their activities were futile and self-defeating. This step, "though relegated more to the moral and existential realm, is nonetheless important so that one does not live alone in the lie and believe that such activity is generally good for something, provokes something, and accomplishes something. A strongly articulated truth and concern for humanity carries a certain charm that even words can radiate something and leave a trace in the 'hidden consciousness' of society". It is important to see its mission in protecting people from the pressures of the system, not in inventing better systems. And as far as the future is concerned, the dissident should be more concerned with the moral and political values on which society should be based, instead of such speculations as to how and to what extent such values are secured for the people.

After reading this essay, now almost 40 years old, we must realise that without Havel and the other prisoners of conscience of the communist regime, the Central European countries would not have access to NATO and the European Union today⁴. And let us add that it is precisely since the founding of the European Union that the part of Europe in question has not experienced mutual military solutions to common problems. It is therefore important, when making demands for peace, to reflect on our own history and to give the concept of peace real content and a possible future.

⁴ David Klimeš. Rozhovory.

