



by ORAVA (Source: AMŠ, 1979).

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 Mountains on 14 February 1970.
 y 1973, and toward the end of
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 also kept pace with new video
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FIGURE 12.18 *During the 1980s, the production of video technology was steadily rising and, in particular, news and journalism stopped using film material. Instead of VCR, the term 'magnetoscope' was used, but this term did not survive.* (© V. Šimek, 1989).

Fear of the opposition

Let us return to the political context. The slogans declaring 'forever' with the Soviet Union may have rid the nation of hope, but certain events would force the powers and, respectively, television, not only to take a stand, but also to react.

TV management and the authorities were on high alert around the anniversaries of certain controversial events, such as the 'Palach Week' in January, which commemorated the self-immolation of the student Jan Palach, in 1969, 21 August when demonstrations to mark the Warsaw Pact 'brotherly assistance' could take place and of course International Students' Day on 17 November. These dates posed a high risk of unrest, although after the radical suppression of demonstrations on these days in 1969 the danger of uncontrollable events subsided. Television management signed a new contract at the very beginning of normalization (1 January 1971) with the Ministry of National Defence's Main Political Authority, one that ensured cooperation in the promotion of the Warsaw Pact forces and the Czechoslovak

People's Army. More concretely, this meant that the army editorial office of the Prague and Bratislava studios would take on seven military officers and other personnel from the Ministry of the Interior in order to control the content in this area.

As of 1972, television adopted what were known as thematic and ideological production and broadcasting plans, ones which had to be periodically approved by the Ideological Commission of CC CzCP. The consulting phase of individual projects in their preparatory stages, as well as the programmes' feedback, were carried out by the Central Committee's Department for Mass Media.

An even more exclusive political union was the secret contract of CST with the Federal Ministry of the Interior (23 July 1975) concerning the 'free use of film materials whose acquisition was funded by the ministry' (Cysařová 2003a: 15). In effect, this meant the wholly unscrupulous possibility of using materials acquired by the secret police (StB) in order to discredit various individuals, e.g. emigrants or dissidents. This soon became very useful when the *Charter 77 Proclamation*, a human rights manifesto, was published in January 1977.⁶⁷

The text and its publication elicited a hysterical reaction from the communists and triggered a massive counter-campaign. It manifested itself on the TV screens in at least three programmes: in the ten-minute segment *Who Is Václav Havel?*⁶⁸ (20 January), and in the programmes *From A Counter-revolutionary's Diary*⁶⁹ (22 January), and *The Grand Game*⁷⁰ (23 January). The speed with which the TV employees were able to prepare these programmes was actually quite impressive. The first film introduced Václav Havel's family situation, referred to his bourgeois origins, and in the evaluation of his dramatic work it (quite aptly) observed that 'it has nothing in common with socialist culture'. Havel was thus portrayed as enemy number one. The second film used numerous secret police shots in order to discredit Pavel Kohout, the writer and Prague Spring activist. He was portrayed as wealthy and the television station subsequently received numerous letters in which the viewers 'were outraged at the fact that he lived such a comfortable life and yet he was dissatisfied'. The third film was pure agitprop 'about the activity of foreign espionage centres, residents, and residencies in Czechoslovakia and the people who subvert our socialist regime' (Růžička 2002: 11).

The climax of this campaign, however, was the convention of the representatives of Czechoslovakia's Artistic Union representatives in the

⁶⁷ ['Prohlášení Charty 77']

⁶⁸ ['Kdo je Václav Havel?']

⁶⁹ ['Z deníku kontrarevolucionáře']

⁷⁰ ['Vysoká hra']

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National Theater's historic building on 28 January 1977. In a live broadcast they condemned 'subversive elements' and publicly expressed support for the regime. The most engaged of them did so directly in front of the cameras, while others did so by their mere presence, without even realizing it. 'This is why we hold in contempt those who, in the unbridled pride of their narcissistic haughtiness, for selfish interests, or even for filthy lucre in various places all over the world – even in our land a small group of such backsliders and traitors can be found – divorce and isolate themselves from their own people'.⁷¹ Jiřina Švorcová, who was to become the popular Woman behind the Counter, stormed off the stage. The document, signed by everyone in attendance called *For New Creative Deeds in the Name of Socialism and Peace*⁷² and became known as the *Anti-Charter*. Historian and former dissident Petruška Šustrová described the absurd situation caused by the wilful act perpetuated by the power wielders, with the following words: 'The regime thus pitted against each other the official personalities and the representatives of unofficial culture, the permitted versus the prohibited, and, in many cases, turned friends and former colleagues into enemies' (Šustrová – Mlejnek 2012: 219). After all, the regime had its own way with the main representatives of dissent, who, apart from *Charter 77*, united in the civic activity of The Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted and were then sentenced to prison in one of the greatest political trials of the normalization period. Six personalities were sentenced to a total of 21.5 years of imprisonment for 'subversion of the republic': Havel for 4.5 years and the former TV journalist from the 1960s, Otká Bednářová, for 3 years.

After this experience and the subversive broadcasting which took place in August 1968, the secret police, in cooperation with the Ministry of National Defence, devised a television and radio protection plan in 1977 to protect the airwaves in times of national crisis from 'abuse by anti-state elements and anti-socialist forces'. Called *WAVE*⁷³ it outlined measures for the capture of buildings, interruption of broadcasting, and the transmission of back-up programming under the direction of the secret police. 'For twelve years, the plan sat in the safes without any change. It was updated in the summer of 1989', says Daniel Růžička (Růžička 1998b).

We must remember that the regime's sense of insecurity and fear of opposition was heightened by events in neighbouring socialist Poland, where the Polish opposition trade union movement Solidarity was founded in 1980. A union movement with mass support, it was able to demand an open

⁷¹ Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 'Czechoslovak Anti-Charter 1977', *Making the History of 1989*, Item #22, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/22> (accessed 12 November 2016).

⁷² ['Za nové tvůrčí činy ve jménu socialismu a míru']

⁷³ [VLNA]

dialogue with the authorities. (Martial law was subsequently imposed and members of the movement were subjected to political persecution.) When the Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyła, later known as John Paul II, was appointed Pope in 1978 (the first Slav to hold the position), it was perceived by the Czechoslovak regime as another threat to its grip on power, as one of the goals of communism was to eliminate the church and all religious belief. Following the collapse of communism it was revealed that the Soviet authorities had plotted with the KGB to assassinate John Paul II in 1981.

Hope for change in the Soviet Bloc spread suddenly after the death of the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, and even more so when two of his replacements (Konstantin Chernenko and Yuri Andropov) died shortly afterwards, thus requiring the central party of the empire to turn to someone younger for direction. It discovered Mikhail Gorbachev. With him, the ice began to break, foreign policy was re-evaluated and thus the relationships between the superpowers improved (i.e. his several meetings with Ronald Reagan), while the terms of *glasnost* (political openness) and *perestroika* (reformation) became symbols of a certain political thaw in all spheres of life. In 1987, Gorbachev visited Prague and announced to Czechoslovak communists that the Soviet Union was dealing with so many problems that it could no longer pay attention to the other countries of the Eastern Bloc. Naturally, this was a blow to the Czechoslovak leadership, and one after which they only tightened their reins.⁷⁴ The so-called *perestroika* television programmes did not take effect in CST until quite late, around 1988. *The Economic Notebook*⁷⁵ and *Probes* were marginally journalistic programmes but they allowed for a certain amount of criticism to be heard (Bednařík 2015b:124–141). This was, however, a display of desperate backwardness, as more and more open criticism of the regime started appearing in all spheres of life, namely in film, in documentaries especially. The same went for all the countries of the Eastern Bloc (Schlegel 1999, Švec-Macura-Štoll, P. 1996, Švec 2013, Štoll 2016).

⁷⁴ See the study on *glasnost* in Soviet cinematography (Horton-Brashinsky 1992).

⁷⁵ ['Hospodářský zápisník']

TELEVISION AND TOTALITARIANISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

From the First Democratic Republic
to the Fall of Communism

MARTIN ŠTOLL



BLOOMSBURY