SUMMARIES

COMPARING THE INCOMPARABLE
OR: WAS THERE A TOTALITARIAN EPOCH
IN CONTEMPORARY CZECH HISTORY?

Miloš Havelka

This study aims at illustrating some specific problems arising whenever the concept of totalitarianism is applied to the Czech case. The main focus is on broadening the scope by adding sociological and demographic aspects to a perspective more commonly limited to strictly political factors.

Taking issue with the common application of the term “totalitarian” to the entire period from 1938 to 1989, the author emphasizes the scope of change that Czech society experienced up to 1956, and looks for an internal commonality extending over the whole period. He argues that the number of changes altering the ethnic, demographic, social, and political stratification of Czech society between 1938 and 1956, in contrast to what is implied by the “democratic tradition” so frequently being claimed for the First Republic, brought about a “totalitarian mindset” which worked in favour of the dictatorships of the time. An exploitation of mass dynamics (as described by Hannah Arendt) by those in power consciously manipulating social structures in the period 1938 to 1956 is identified as the principal prerequisite.

ABOUT ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE CONCEPT OF TOTALITARIANISM, WITH EARLIER APPROACHES TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

Bedřich Loewenstein

This study assesses Miloš Havelka’s hypothesis of a totalitarian epoch in Czech history from four different points of view. First to be examined is the usage of the term “totalitarianism” in postwar Czech political discourse. Among other things, the author draws attention to the fact that this term was used only for rhetorical, polemical applications of a short-term nature, particularly when somebody or something was termed “fascist.” The second point concerns the contemporary conviction of a totalitarian continuity in Czech society after “Munich.” In this context, the author points out that émigré literature, when emotional strength is complemented by a degree of self-criticism, offers some insights worth considering. Part three examines to what degree the concept of totalitarianism which came to be accepted from the 1950s onwards is applicable to Czech society. As far as the 1950s are concerned,
and with the concept of a “political religion” taken into account, the answer is “yes.”

The fourth and final part takes a critical look at the attempts at de-totalizing (de-Stalinizing) society in the 1960s. In a digression, the efforts at research into fascism of the period examined are interpreted as a proof of an irrational animosity against civilisation common to both totalitarian systems.

UNEXPECTED PARRALLELS – OR CURRENTS HIDDEN BELOW THE SURFACE

Jan Dobeš

This contribution deals with the tendencies that evolved in Czech society during the mid-1930s and exerted a hidden influence in the years that followed. The principal pillars on which modern Czech society had rested since its formation in the 19th century were unsettled even before World War II began. Previously unknown features began to evolve in the political system, the economic order, the social relations, the way the public looked upon cultural developments, and societal atmosphere in general. The dramatic course of events that was framed by “Munich,” the Second Republic, the emergence of the protectorate, occupation, liberation, and finally the events of February 1948, accelerated this development.

The aim of the author is to demonstrate that beneath the surface of all these separate political developments a continual process of change was at work. Even though the various regimes of this period showed considerable differences in their external appearance, they offered surprising similarities internally. In spite of these new qualities it does not seem appropriate to call this period totalitarian according to the criteria of the classical theory of totalitarianism.

THE FORGOTTEN CONTINUITIES OF THE PARAGON OF DEMOCRACY

Marína Zavacká

In her brief commentary to Miloš Havelka’s study, Zavacká makes the point that a discussion of the crisis of Czech democracy since the 1930s ought to take into account long-term continuities to a greater degree than has so far been the case. Although xenophobic and anti-pluralist tendencies were marginalized in the First Republic with the raison d’état being the main consideration for this course of action, they did exist in the range of political thought and were connected with political ambitions of their own. That Czech society after 1945 was susceptible to nationalist politics exploiting social demagoguery was thus not an abrupt breach of tradition, but rather a return to another, parallel line of tradition. Moreover, the radicalism of postwar Czech society was not altogether out of step with the contemporary European mainstream.