

*Otáhal, Milan and Vaněk, Miroslav: Sto studentských revolucí. Studenti v období pádu komunismu – Životopisná vyprávění [A hundred student revolutions. Students during the fall of communism – biographic narratives].*

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Otáhal's and Vaněk's book is a groundbreaking work in both its theme and its methodology (oral history), which is unique in Czech historiography. The impetus for collecting oral histories was the authors' conviction that a thorough examination of the everyday lives and experiences of students could explain how and why students emerged so suddenly as a leading force in the 1989 revolution.

Since oral history is almost unknown to most Czechs as a methodology, the authors find it necessary to provide the readers with an introduction not only to the period with which the book deals, but to the concept of oral history itself. The book is thus divided into five parts: two introductions (one to the period of 1968–1989, and one to oral history), an interpretation or analysis of the empirical material, a conclusion, and finally a comprehensive (660 page) appendix containing transcripts from sixty-five of the one hundred oral histories.

The historical introduction covers the period 1968–1989 and focuses on themes of particular relevance to the lives of students and young people in general during the „Normalization“. The introduction to the methodology is subdivided into two parts: the first introduces the method of oral history in general terms, whereas the second part addresses oral history in the context of this specific project.

In their analytical chapter Otáhal and Vaněk interpret the interviews in regard to the narrators' statements on a wide range of subjects germane to their engagement in the revolution: family environment; experience in schools, and at universities and colleges; relations with the Socialist Youth Union (Socialistický svaz mládeže, SSM); extra-circular activities; contacts with dissidents and Samizdat editions et cetera.

Otáhal and Vaněk point out that while families played an important part in forming the students' basic attitudes towards society and life in general, their family background was not decisive to their activities during the revolution. The students came from a wide variety of family environments and as they later on formulated their own perceptions of the world, it was rather these evaluations of life that urged them to engage in the revolution.

The authors also point out that while most of the students did not consider the SSM activities in their early years political, their impression of this organization

changed by the time they reached university. Here the students were divided into two groups. The first were those activists who used the SSM for their own purposes that were often more or less openly in contradiction to the wishes of the regime. The second consisted of a group of independent students who did not want to be connected with the regime in any way. It is significant that the students who were in contact with dissidents and read *Samizdat* were much more likely to belong to the latter group. An interesting passage recounts how the regime made enemies of ordinary students by curtailing their access to music and literature. As soon as the preferences of the young people grew apart from the official perception of good taste, they were alienated by the regime.

An important part of the interpretation deals with the student demonstration of 17 November, 1989 and the ensuing student strike. The strike lasted until 29 December when Havel was appointed president. The authors make a strong case that the demonstration was a watershed event that mobilized hitherto uninvolved students, but still only one out of three students was involved in the revolution at all. Otáhal and Vaněk recognize the pace and effectiveness with which the active students managed to organize the strike, and they point to the fact that the revolution that followed the demonstration was as much of a surprise to the students, as it was to others.

In the conclusion the authors evaluate the utility of oral history, which draws out the drama of „Normalization“ that is lost in more conventional histories. Thus the authors reject the interpretation of „Normalization“ as a period in which history stood still. As one of the most important aspects of the collection of personal memories is mentioned the fact that the interviews provide us with a more full picture of life during „Normalization“.

The interpretative chapter lends an air of solid and thorough scholarship to the work. The authors keep their goal in sight, even through detailed digressions. These analyses could, however, be strengthened considerably by more frequent conclusions on the part of the authors. Vaněk and Otáhal seem to be so keen on sharing their information with the reader that they forget to spell out the conclusions implied in their interpretation.

There is much in Vaněk and Otáhal's study to be commended. The appendix itself is an invaluable source for further studying of the Czechoslovak society in the period 1968–1989, and all in all the book provokes in its reader the interest needed to re-evaluate this understudied yet significant period of Czechoslovak history.