

Pullmann, Michal: Konec experimentu: Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu [The End of Experiment. Perestroika and the Demise of Communism in Czechoslovakia].

Scriptorium, Praha 2011, 243 S., ISBN 978-80-87271-31-5.

Michal Pullmann's book on the closing years of communist power in Czechoslovakia produces challenging new interpretations of a period that has received very little attention from serious historians. It uses a range of published and unpublished

⁷ *Mésároš, Július: Dve vedecko-populárne publikácie o Ľudovítovi Štúrovi [Zwei populärwissenschaftliche Publikationen über Ľudovít Štúr].* In: *Historický časopis* 5 (1957) H. 1, 116-118.

⁸ *Jablonický, Jozef: Glosy o historiografii SNP. Zneužívanie a falšovanie dejín SNP [Glossen über die Historiografie zum Slowakischen Nationalaufstand. Missbrauch und Verfälschung der Geschichte des Slowakischen Nationalaufstands].* Bratislava 1994. – *Ders.: Slovenské národné povstanie a tri etapy jeho hodnotenia [Der Slowakische Nationalaufstand und drei Etappen seiner Bewertung].* In: *Historický časopis* 39 (1991) H. 4-5, 456-463.

sources to back up theses on how the influence of Gorbachev's perestroika in the Soviet Union led to a remarkably rapid disintegration of an apparently stable power structure. There has been some very positive and also some very hostile Czech media coverage for his arguments, the latter relating to an unjustified perception that the book aims to give the communist regime an easy ride. It should rather be welcomed as a pioneering attempt to address difficult issues, even if some parts of his argument may warrant further development.

Pullmann challenges comfortable assumptions on the normalisation period arguing that the system of power relied on the support base not of "a narrow stratum of the bureaucracy," but of the "overwhelming majority of the population" (p. 223). That support was always ambivalent and mixed with scepticism and cynicism, but it went beyond "mere loyal adaptation" (p. 222). Instead, Pullmann identifies a "consensus." People retained a belief in socialism as, in some sense, a more desirable social order than capitalism – opinion polls from the time give support to this – and mouthed the more specific but ultimately vacuous ideological formulations of the elite. In return they had enough free space for living reasonably fulfilling lives.

This "consensus" was then disrupted as changes in the Soviet Union pushed the Czechoslovak leadership into opening discussions which, in contrast to phoney discussions of previous years, they were no longer able to control. Hopes and also fears were aroused among different social groups and they began expressing opinions and asking questions that could no longer be handled within an established vocabulary that Pullmann places at the centre of his notion of consensus. Analysis of the pronouncements of leading party and government figures demonstrates growing confusion and uncertainty, while opinion polls – not made public at the time – show declining faith in socialism. Thus, in his view, it was the disintegration in the authorities' ability to maintain consensus, rather than the activities of opposition groups, that triggered the downfall of communism.

Much of this is persuasively argued, but key themes need further development and clarification. Most questionable is the treatment of the mechanisms of maintaining power after normalisation and the use of the term consensus. Rejecting the totalitarian framework, and the portrayal of power as dependent on repression alone, need not mean rejecting the importance of forms of repression. This shifted over time as active opposition was subdued and isolated from the population through the early 1970s, but use of the term consensus risks confusion between two different kinds of consensus, a genuine one and a phoney or imposed one.

Part of the regime's method of ruling was to create the appearance of a consensus around its own ideology and phraseology, using repression when necessary. In essence, Pullmann shows the breakdown of this phoney consensus, which is not the same as the rupturing of a society-wide consensus, and the resulting disintegration of the regime from within. There is a great deal left for further investigation, including the development and mechanisms for ensuring political stability in post-normalisation Czechoslovakia, the means whereby power passed to a new regime and the significance of the normalisation period for subsequent development.

On this last point the author concludes with the speculative and provocative argument that the heritage of normalisation lives on with a new consensus built around

the mouthing of neo-liberal slogans which resemble the ideological vacuousness of normalisation (pp. 225-227). This exaggerates continuity from the past. After 1989 there was no analogous need for an artificially imposed consensus and there were no comparable coercive means to maintain it. Different opinions could coexist, and be expressed in public, without threatening the regime or causing panic in its upper reaches.

Nevertheless, by asking difficult questions in a forthright and clear way, this book has already stimulated public debate over the heritage of the normalisation period. It will have truly succeeded if it also stimulates more research over the difficult questions still to be answered.