

Knapík, Jiří / Franc, Martin a kol: Průvodce kulturním děním a životním stylem v českých zemích 1948-1967. Svazek I. A-O, Svazek II. P-Ž [A Guide to Cultural Life and Lifestyle in the Czech Lands, 1948-1967. Volume I. A-O, Volume II. P-Ž].

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Jiří Knapík's and Martin Franc's guide to culture and lifestyle during the first two decades of communism is a remarkable undertaking. Leading a group of forty authors, Knapík and Franc have compiled a 1,300 page two-volume lexicon of 2,500 keywords that constituted the fabric of everyday life during the 1950s and 1960s in Czechoslovakia.¹ Knapík has worked on cultural politics during the early years of communism, and Franc on consumption, and thus they are well positioned to understand how fundamental these aspects of everyday life were to the experience of communism.

In their introduction, which leads the two-volume work, they envision the lexicon as benefitting historians but also being used in schools and of interest to a large swath of laypersons. Undoubtedly, it is a vital asset for historians working on this period of history. But they have also taken steps to make it a guide that invites readers to take a "journey" back to the 1950s and 1960s: whenever there is mention of a keyword (be it in another keyword entry or in one of the various essays), it is offset with a small arrow and italicized. For example, the entry for "rolety", the shop window shutters that were a frequent sight and sign of a lack of consumer items, also refers to empty window displays (výlohy) and the "Spartakiáda", when window displays were purposefully but temporarily improved. Both "výlohy" and "Spartakiáda" are offset in this manner, inviting the reader to flip to those separate entries and read on.

Following the editors' "guide to the guide," there is a four page thematic introduction entitled "Cultural Life and the Formation of a 'Socialist Way-of-Life' in Post-February Czechoslovakia". This in turn is followed by three sub-introductions: I. The General Characteristics of the Period 1948-1967 (an attempt at periodization); II. The Governing and Institutional Structures at the Forefront of Cultural and Social Life; III. An Attempt to Characterize the 'Socialist Way-of-Life'. Although the keyword entries are listed alphabetically, efforts for readers to be able to approach them thematically are evident throughout. Prior to the entries, the keywords are listed according to theme (Institutions, Organizations, Key Documents, Acronyms, Slogans, etc.). Following the keyword entries, we find a list of the names of government officials and committee members, slogans of the day, the price of eggs during given years, television programming schedules, and more. The bibliography comes next, listing all sources used, and a name index.

What could obviously be overwhelming is lightened by the incorporation of various small black-and-white illustrations peppered throughout the keyword entries which extend over the two volumes. It allows readers to get a sense of the aes-

¹ Like many works on the communist period, the authors focus on the Czech lands, not wanting to claim to cover the Slovak experience. At the same time, this is very much a book about the Czechoslovak experience.

thetics of the time, which is crucial. Here one finds a photograph of Alobal, the aluminum foil introduced in 1965 – as well as political posters, advertising, covers of magazines and newspapers, socialist buildings, and snapshots from political celebrations.

Such an important collection of vital information, presented with precision and care, deserves, however, a better introduction. Knapík and Franc use the “guide to the guide” to lay out the structure of the book, which is necessary, but otherwise their tone is oddly defensive as if they must justify the project. They take pains to situate it in current literature and trends, pointing out that a lexicon such as theirs already exists in both Poland and Germany, and that one for the Czech case is long overdue. At various points, they bring up Andrew Roberts’ “A Dictionary of Czech Popular Culture”, published by the Central European Press in 2005, but in a somewhat derogatory fashion. They explain why their timeframe of 1948-1967 is “untypical” when in fact it seems entirely logical. The editors would have been wiser to embrace what they have achieved here and discuss it in the larger terms that it demands. How will this impact the memory of communism (and how is that to be differentiated from the history of communism)? Indeed, how to keep nostalgia at bay when delving into what were both troublesome but also enjoyable aspects of most people’s lives? How does this collection belong to a larger shift toward cultural history, and how does it benefit the study of 1948-1967, which also witnessed tragedies much graver than shuttered shop windows? Altogether, this lexicon is a deeply intellectual endeavor and requires an editors’ introduction that matches it. Nevertheless, we can only hope that the editors and their team will produce a similar collection for 1968 through 1990. Like this one, it would be invaluable.