

Franc, Martin / Knapík, Jiří: Volný čas v českých zemích, 1957-1967 [Free Time in the Bohemian Lands, 1957-1967].

Academia, Praha 2013, 573 S., ISBN 978-80-200-2229-5.

“Free time” is a rewarding concept to consider in the context of socialist Czechoslovakia – one that raises fundamental questions about possibilities for total state control and relative social autonomy in a dirigiste system that used physical force and other inducements (some “gentle”) to instill ideological conformity within a diverse population. What did free time mean in this context? Was it simply time off from hum-drum routines of work, school and everyday chores, was it also mental release from omnipresent party propaganda? Was free time – in whatever sense – ever fully “free” in socialist Czechoslovakia, where the party-state, with its various celebrations of work, aimed to have a monopoly on truth and used free time as one means for advancing that monopoly? Martin Franc and Jiří Knapík have written important studies concerning cultural politics and everyday life in socialist Czechoslovakia.¹ Their newest co-authored work is a history of free time in the Bohemian lands between 1957 and 1967, years of complex changes between Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” and the Prague Spring.

The book contains five main chapters. Chapter One, “Free Time in Historical Perspective, 1945-1956”, provides background information on the decade preceding the book’s temporal focus. In this “founding” era, the Constitution of May 9, 1948 was written, guaranteeing the right to relaxation (odpočinek). Not all forms of relaxation were supported, however. The regime favored politically engaged and cultural/educational activities promoting the party-state and its ideology, and revealed a “quickly strengthening preference for collective forms of leisure and organized use of free time, the majority of them tied in some manner to individuals’ work classifi-

¹ See, for example, *Franc, Martin / Knapík, Jiří: Průvodce kulturním děním a životním stylem v českých zemích, 1948-1967 [A Guide to Cultural Events and Lifestyle in the Bohemian Lands, 1948-1967].* 2 vols. Praha 2011.

cation” (p. 20). The Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (ROH), factory clubs, and cultural houses were created in this thime, as were the Czechoslovak Union of Youth (ČSM) and the Union for Cooperation with the Army (Svazarm). The free time of children and youth received special attention, because young people were considered to be “most easily manipulated” and “a sort of avant-garde of socialism” (p. 40).

In Chapter Two, “Free Time, 1957-1967: Contemporary Discussion and Demarcation”, Franc and Knapík begin their examination of free time during the decade leading up to the Prague Spring. The chapter presents contemporary expert opinions on the nature and function of free time – opinions that reveal diversity of thought and ideas from both halves of the Cold War divide. Antonín Červinka, a Soviet-inspired theorist at the Higher School of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, argued that free time should consist of “active leisure, self-cultivation, the teaching of children, and active participation in public and cultural life” (p. 55). Radoslav Selucký, a reformist sociologist, found Červinka’s ideas to be too “utilitarian”, maintaining that “passive leisure and passive forms of fun” also had to be considered (pp. 55-56). The theories of French sociologist Joffre Dumazedier influenced Selucký and other Czechoslovak reformist sociologists. Dumazedier characterized free time as “the aggregate of activities, which a person can carry out with full arbitrariness (s plnou libovůlí), whether they relax or have fun or contribute to their personal development, when they are freed from their work, family, and social obligations” (p. 59).

With over 200 pages, the third chapter, “Free Time: The Regime, Society and the Individual”, is the book’s lengthiest part. It begins with a discussion of critical contextual shifts in Czechoslovakia around 1960, including the growth of consumerism in the face of economic crisis, some limited liberalization which intellectuals enjoyed more than other social groups, increased contacts with western countries, and “political apathy, particularly among youth” (p. 111). The authors argue that regime responses to these shifts contributed to “the progressive privatization of free time and decline in collective forms of spending it” (p. 111). Still, official organs continued to aim for “‘socially desirable’ spending of free time” (p. 134). A highlight of this chapter are the findings of a survey conducted in the late 1950s. The survey revealed low levels of interest in official free-time activities, particularly among workers and working-class youth (pp. 207-209). As a result, party-state organs undertook some diversification of official free-time activities, trying to appeal to “personal motivation and satisfaction” (p. 211). A slightly broader array of “interest activities (zájmové činnosti)” was offered, albeit within the confines of official structures and goals. Attention to youth increased due to perceptions about “the passivity of the young generation in political life and especially the growing problem of their criminality” (p. 277). This chapter suggests that the party-state was not in total control of its population – that it reinvented its policies in order to overcome social disinterest. This suggestion invites analysis of possibilities for total state control and relative social autonomy in socialist Czechoslovakia through the study of everyday life.

Following the lengthy third chapter is a short chapter entitled “‘The Pathology of the Free Time’ of Adults and Youth.” Despite its brevity (only 25 pages), this might

be the book's potentially most important part. Here the authors present key examples of alternative, non-sanctioned pastimes, including listening to rock music, nudism, church attendance, heavy drinking, drug use, gambling, prostitution, and other forms of working when not on the job (*melouchaření*). In official eyes, these were "non-desirable remnants of earlier habits from the capitalist period or the results of brisk subversive activities from the West"; they were "negative phenomena" belonging to „the pathology of free time”, which needed "definitive removal" (p. 312). Statistics indicate significant levels of participation in non-sanctioned pastimes. For example, in 1962 Czechoslovakia ranked sixth in the world for highest alcohol consumption (p. 317) and around 1967 there were almost 10 000 prostitutes registered with the police (p. 324). The regime tried to eliminate these undesirable free-time activities, but with limited success. "Pathology" among youth posed a particular challenge; in 1964 the number of legally punishable acts among people between the ages of 15 and 18 rose 43 % (p. 329). Particularly worrisome were statistics showing "that the youthful culprits of punishable acts came overwhelmingly from workers' families" (p. 332). This very important chapter could better serve as the book's last substantive chapter and more systematically consider what unofficial free-time activities reveal about party-state power in socialist Czechoslovakia.

Chapter Five, "Contemporary Forms of Spending Free Time", builds upon the information presented in Chapter Three and provides further facts about more individualized and privatized "non-pathological" free-time activities from 1957 to 1967. Domestic travelling to chateaux, the water, and weekend houses (*chaty* and *chalupy*) is discussed, as is foreign travel. The section on camping includes details about consumer goods increasingly available for this pastime and Pioneer camps for children. Many of the book's final pages are devoted to television watching with mention of favorite shows, collecting of stamps and match-box covers, do-it-yourself activities, and model building.

This book is worthwhile reading for scholars seeking to understand the complexities of state-society relations under socialism through the lens of everyday-life activities. Franc and Knapík deftly draw evidence from films, contemporary periodical literature, recent Czech dissertations treating postwar social history, and archival records of leading Communist Party organs, including the Central Committee, ministerial records pertaining to education and culture, holdings in the All-Union Archive (*Všeodborový archiv*), and police reports in the Security Services Archive (ABS). Some comparisons are made to the Polish and East German cases.

The authors suggest that future studies of free time in socialist Czechoslovakia could give more attention to local history and use more oral history. One could hope that future studies also give more conceptual and methodological attention to the meaning and significance of "free time" in systems of single-party rule with command economies, and perhaps in pluralist, free-market systems, as well, where the differences might not be so tremendous as are sometimes presumed.

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