

A WESTERN INVENTION?

The Discovery of Czech Dissidence in the 1970s

Peter Bugge

This article investigates when and how the word “dissident” (along with “dissent” and derived adjectives) entered the vocabulary of Czech regime-critical writers. In 1978, Václav Havel expressed his deep scepticism towards the term, which he held to be a Western journalistic invention, but examination of the Czech émigré journals *Svědectví* (Testimony) and *Listy* (Pages) reveals a more complex picture. The term

was first used in 1974 with reference to Soviet activists, and although it did at times appear in translations from Western media, its users were mostly émigré Czechs or other Eastern Europeans collectively trying to make sense of new, “non-political” modes of regime-critical activity throughout the Eastern Bloc. Domestic Czech contributors first used the term in 1976, and by the end of the decade it had become firmly established in the regime-critical vocabulary at home and in exile. Reform Communists long preferred the term and idea of “opposition,” which – as openly expressed in the Charter 77 declaration – progressively lost its attractiveness as a viable strategy for challenging the Husák regime, however. Despite Havel’s reservations, “dissidence” thus won out as the most adequate moniker for his and other activists’ non-political, civic engagement.