

*Pavlíček, Tomáš W./Hyklová, Petra/Šolc, Martin: Astronomers behind the Iron Curtain: The First Postwar Generation in Czechoslovakia.*

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This book tells the story of postwar Czechoslovak astronomy as a success story in which scholars from a country of modest proportions gained international recognition in this rather expensive, equipment-intensive, politically relevant and culturally captivating field of science. It maps the postwar development of the discipline in Czechoslovakia as well as individual life trajectories of renowned Czech and Slovak astronomers. The focus lies on the 1960s and 1970s, a period when the first postwar generation – which, according to the authors, was characterized by distinctive experiences and consequently by particularly strong internal coherence – took over the organization of astronomical research in the country and its representation in international scientific fora.

Most of the text was written by Tomáš Pavlíček, a researcher and archivist at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, but the study benefits from the insights of the two co-authors Petra Hyklová and Martin Šolc with their partly different, partly overlapping backgrounds in natural science and the history of science and astronomy. It is based on an amazingly broad range of sources, including previously unexplored archive material from several Czech archives and oral history interviews with both prominent and lesser-known Czech astronomers. The book also includes an informative appendix containing unique photographs from private and archival collections, lists of important names and observatories, tables with statistical data on the first postwar generation of astronomers, and subject and name indices. One formal point of criticism concerns the language. The study was translated from Czech and contains some awkward and at times irritating phrasing that could have been avoided with more careful language editing. Two of many examples are the use of the term “minor scholars” for scholars from smaller European countries and the statement that “[t]he Iron Curtain did not have the strict east-west opposition” (p. 259).

The book is divided into six chapters organized more or less chronologically. The first chapter entitled “Teachers” provides an overview of the tradition of astronomical research in the Czech and Slovak lands until the outbreak of World War II. This is followed by a series of mostly personal, memory-based insights into the lives of students during the occupation of Czechoslovakia, with the aim of emphasizing the unique experience of this generation. The third chapter delves into the immediate postwar period, when the communist takeover brought fundamental changes to education and science. These changes also affected astronomy, a field that was particularly relevant from the perspective of state-imposed scientific atheism. The next two chapters are devoted to the developments in the 1950s and 1960s, when the postwar generation took the lead in astronomical research in Czechoslovakia and became present in the international scientific community. On a positive note, these two chapters offer rich and multifaceted insights into astronomical research during these two decades, covering topics as diverse as institutes, instruments, methods, gender, and regional disparities. However, the price for this wealth of information is a lack of consistency in argumentation and a confusing, difficult-to-follow structure. For instance, one of the three subsections in the fourth chapter is entitled “New instruments, new horizons”, while the title of the subsequent chapter is “New instruments”. Finally, the focus of the last thematic chapter lies on international contacts, highlighting the role and prominence of Czechoslovak astronomy and its experts in international organizations and science diplomacy.

The merit of the book certainly lies in the fact that it draws attention to a discipline whose achievements and reputation were almost forgotten in Czechia after 1989. What is more, the multi-perspective analysis of the development of Czechoslovak astronomy illuminates aspects that tend to be overlooked in research on science of this period – from an international perspective due to the focus on the effects of the Cold War, and in the national context owing to the overemphasis on Stalinist deformations and political restrictions on science. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it becomes evident that in their attempt to pay homage to Czechoslovak astronomy

and highlight its international reputation, the authors paid very little and sometimes even no attention to the political context. While it is true that the Iron Curtain was not as impenetrable as the term suggests, it seems to almost disappear in the book. This is surprising in itself given that the title indicates an examination of astronomers *behind the Iron Curtain*. The chapter discussing developments in Czechoslovak astronomy until 1956, at the height of Stalinism and international isolation, stresses the circulation of knowledge across borders, the international exchange of periodicals, and cooperation with the observatory in Leiden in the Netherlands – without commenting on how this narrative aligns with the contradictory conventional views about science in the Stalinist era.

At several places in the book, the line of argumentation is not entirely plausible. To demonstrate Czechoslovak cooperation with East and West, the authors point out two key areas: satellite-based space research within the Eastern bloc's *Interkosmos* program and travels to the West in connection with Czechoslovak astronomers' memberships in international organizations. However, here one would expect some reflections on the extent to which scientific representation of the country in international fora can already be described as a form of *cooperation* with the West, even if it certainly led to regular contact with Western scientists. Finally, the claim that the Soviet Union “really needed a minor Eastern bloc partner for further negotiations in international space diplomacy” (p. 198) after losing the moon race is hardly convincing and would require further evidence. It was precisely during the period after the moon landing when there was a notable rapprochement between Soviet and American space authorities and diplomats, as the reciprocal visits between astronauts and cosmonauts or the joint Apollo-Soyuz mission demonstrate. Taken together, all these examples illustrate that the authors' argumentation would benefit from a more comprehensive embedding of the developments within their historical context. Nevertheless, with its focus on aspects and perspectives rarely considered in research on science in this period, its impressive source base, and the insights into the personal experiences of astronomers of a very specific generation, the book is a good starting point for all those interested in the inner workings of the discipline during the Cold War as well as the trajectories of postwar scholars.