

Preiss, Marek/Doubková, Nikola/Heissler, Radek (eds.): Ve vyhnanství. Transgenerační vnímání akce Asanace [In Exile. Transgenerational Perception of Operation Asanace]. Vavřínek Hutka, Ivanka Lefevvre, Věra Roubalová Kostlánová, Magdalena Uhmánová.

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That the topic of Czechoslovak dissent is far from exhausted is evidenced by a new publication compiled by a trio of researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health (NÚDZ) in Prague. Their research was funded by the Czech Science Foundation for three years starting in 2022, and in parallel, a group of historians associated with the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences conducted research focused on the history of Charter 77 from a Czech and transnational perspective. I was a member of the latter team, and it is reasonable to view the two resulting studies as complementary in some respects – although the teams had no contact with each other, which I consider significant for the peer-reviewed publication.

The book consists of several chapters in various genres by different authors and can therefore be considered a collection. The focus is on three chapters examining the first, second, and third generations associated with Operation Asanace (Sanitation). The book also includes three witness texts by Věra Roubalová Kostlánová, Ivanka Lefevvre, and Vavřínek Hutka. In the last chapter, a psychologist and PhD student at the Faculty of Education at Charles University, Magdalena Uhmánová, addresses the question of ‘home’ in the context of emigration and re-emigration.

Although I very much welcome the fact that there is discussion of trauma and even its transgenerational transmission in connection with Czechoslovak dissent, I have a fundamental reservation about this book which diminishes its importance for the professional debate in contemporary history. If research is designed to be interdisciplinary – as this project undoubtedly was – it is necessary to include a historian on the team in the role of an expert who, from a professional standpoint and based on profound knowledge of the issue, or at least engage such an expert in the role of a reviewer who would carefully read and comment on the manuscript of the forthcoming publication. This shortcoming is clearly evident in the editors’ introductory text, which sets out to briefly characterize the period of communist rule, the normalization period, the activities of the repressive apparatus, and the role of Charter 77 and Operation Asanace along with its consequences on fourteen pages.

The first chapter, entitled “What we know about Charter 77 and how we evaluate it in hindsight” has very questionable informative value. The sample of almost three hundred respondents aged 15 to 76 is not specified in any detail; the questions are often misleading, and the answers are merely summarized but not interpreted in any way.

The next chapter is largely a memoir text by former Charter 77 signatory Věra Roubalová Kostlánová, a psychotherapist with long-standing experience working with refugees (migrants). Her text is a reminiscence, a present-day reflection on the events of that time. Roubalová Kostlánová, whom I greatly respect for her civic activity then and now, repeats much that was already written in the preceding text. Repeating claims of oppression, of “the arbitrariness of the regime and the arrogance of power” (p. 36), and ranging widely in an effort to describe all the nuances of the system of the time, casts no new light on the events of the period. The same applies to her quasi-survey among former Charter 77 signatories, whom she asks: “What was the hardest thing about Operation Asanace for you?” A question posed in this way obscures the fact that Operation Asanace formed one component of the State Security (StB) strategy aimed at destroying Charter 77. Operation Asanace, with nationwide reach and impact, lasted from 1978 until the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Its essential feature was encouraging targeted people to emigrate, but its (relative) effectiveness was enhanced precisely by the fact that it operated in synergy with other repressive methods of the security apparatus. None of the opposition actors at the time, however, could have known what code names the individual activities of the StB agents bore or how their actions were coordinated, nor whether the violence they were experiencing was part of Operation Asanace. From this perspective, it is also important to note that in the case of some particularly brutal manifestations of violence (like the attacks on Zina Freundová and Zdena Tominová), it has not yet been possible to determine whether they were carefully planned in advance or in fact random, self-initiated actions by individual StB officers.

Asking good questions is a basic methodological skill across the humanities and social sciences, and I believe it is a key skill for any kind of knowledge generation. In my opinion, it would be much more productive to examine exile (expulsion from one’s home country) from the perspective of the time – that is, with the help of contemporary texts, many of which were published in samizdat and some also reprinted in Czechoslovak exile periodicals – and to compare the knowledge gained with the present-day testimonies of former actors from the ranks of the Czechoslovak opposition.

Each of the trio of psychologist co-authors provided one chapter related to the first, second, and third generations associated with Czechoslovak dissent. Radek Heissler focused on the first generation, i.e. the direct victims of persecution, outlining three choices that these people faced: to be active and reckon with the possibility of imprisonment, to withdraw into privacy, or to leave the country. In addition to the direct testimony of one of the actors, this triad also relies on the expertise of Marlies Glasius, who analyses the typology of behaviour in larger-scale conflicts. However, this typology ignores the fact that the strategies – particularly the first two – overlapped to some extent, which is also indicated by Věra Roubalová

Kostlánová when she says (p. 39): “However, we also knew quite a few people in our surroundings who did not sign Charter 77, but, for example, bound samizdat books in complete secrecy during the time of deep normalization.” (p. 39) This group was relatively large in the nationwide context, although exact numbers are not available for obvious reasons. Indeed, the same is confirmed by a closer analysis of the Charter 77 community, which included a number of extremely active people who were not signatories of the declaration, or did not become signatories until the end of the 1980s. Jiřina Šiklová, active in dissent since the early 1970s, serves as a *pars pro toto*: A distributor of foreign literature among other things, she only signed Charter 77 in 1989. Not to mention spheres of dissent beyond Charter 77, which the book does not address. The representatives of the first generation under study are a group of eighteen people who faced repression and were forced to leave Czechoslovakia between 1977 and 1984. However, an essential question the researchers do not ask would be how those who were expelled from Czechoslovakia reflect on their decision, which was part of the StB’s plan.¹

The author of the following chapter is Ivanka Lefevre (née Šimková, formerly Hyblerová), a witness and writer of a remarkable diary in which she very vividly describes life in the Charter 77 community in Prague in 1982.² With a literary quality that surpasses the others in the book, Lefevre’s contribution looks for the roots of her activism in her family history. As readable and valuable as this chapter is, however, it is not clear why it has been included. Although Lefevre went into exile in France in the early 1980s, the inclusion of this text does not make sense from a conceptual point of view. It also seems problematic when she interprets her youngest daughter Eliška’s experience of emigration and her search for her own identity in a foreign country.

The second generation, i.e. the children of former dissidents, is examined by Nikola Doubková by way of in-depth interviews with sixteen respondents. The statistical data seem inconclusive to me because the sample is too small, and speculative conclusions follow from its interpretation. The interviews were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which emphasizes the process of searching for meaning. Anonymized quotations of statements form the core of this chapter. Although I understand the point of anonymization in such surveys, I am not sure whether it is relevant in such a qualitative survey. Reading them from the perspective of historiographic research seems fragmentary, taken out of their historical period and personal biographies. In this context, I consider the following chapter, an autobiographical self-reflection by Vavřinec Hutka (* 1970), the son of folk musician Jaroslav Hutka and Zora Růžová-Hutková, to be the most valuable of the publication’s contributions. Although his father was undoubtedly one of the victims of

¹ Czech Television documentary *Ženy Charty 77* (Women of Charter 77): Zina Freundová, 2007. URL: <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10114412382-zeny-charty-77/> (last accessed 21.11.2025).

² Lefevre, Ivanka: *Migrace 1982. Deníkové záznamy signatářky Charty 77 vystěhované v rámci akce „Asanace“ z Československa* [Migration 1982. The diary entries of a signatory of Charter 77 who was expelled from Czechoslovakia as part of Operation “Asanace”]. Praha 2014.

police harassment associated with Operation Asanace, he and his mother had emigrated to France earlier, in the fall of 1976. Moreover, Vavřinec Hutka was able to visit Czechoslovakia on a regular basis from 1977 to 1986 because his mother married a French citizen.

The third generation, i.e. the grandchildren of people expelled from Czechoslovakia at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, have considerable temporal and emotional distance from the events and, in most cases, try to frame the family stories they are part of in a positive way. Six such people from four families were available for this volume, since three of them are siblings.

The reviewed anthology suffers from a considerable lack of concept, as I have shown above. It juxtaposes commemorative texts, historical excursions, a survey, and annotated results of quantitative research without an obvious intent or analytical point. The graphic design is also distracting, as it inexplicably highlights selected keywords and concepts, thereby being reminiscent of university textbook editing. I believe that applying psychological knowledge to historical material can bring a number of interesting findings and impulses for further thinking. But it must occur within a truly interdisciplinary team. Otherwise, there is a risk that the knowledge gathered by psychologists will be a bundle of banalities, generalities, and inaccuracies for historians. This would certainly be detrimental to a deeper knowledge of the past, which is impoverished without empathy and sensitivity to individuals.